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ABSTRACT

This study reports students' perceptions of their school's curriculum, support services, attendance policies, and social-learning climate. The study analyzed the interview responses of a sample of 236 students, administrators, teachers, and counselors at 6 Florida high schools representing a range of graduation rates. The following general findings are reported: (1) students give equal emphasis to academic and social engagement as the factors influencing academic persistence; (2) schools varied in their orientation to students; and (3) overcrowding had a negative effect on all problems. Key findings include the following: (1) students do not distinguish between the subject matter of their courses and the instructional strategy by which it was delivered; (2) students prefer teachers who use a variety of instructional strategies; (3) many students do not make use of support services; (4) all groups agreed that student services left general curriculum students to fend for themselves; (5) schools in high-graduation districts publicize students' individual achievements; (6) all students desire both order and equal enforcement of conduct codes; (7) crowded halls, limited opportunities for social interaction, irrelevant course content, and teacher indifference are cited as the common reasons for tardiness and cutting classes; (8) principals in the high-graduation schools communicate the school's mission publicly and repeatedly; (9) schools that were clean and displayed positively worded signs had higher graduation rates than those that were dirty and displayed negatively worded signs; and (10) all schools have been slow to respond to increasing student diversity. references, a table of statistical data, and an explanation of references, a table of statistical data, and an explanation of coding categories are appended. (FMW)

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THE ROUTE TO GRADUATION

PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL CURRICULUM STUDENTS

FINAL REPORT

STAR Grant 89-041
"Understanding Florida's Dropout Rate"

Funded by

The Florida Institute of Government

for

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE ROUTE TO GRADUATION

PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL CURRICULUM STUDENTS

STAR Grant #89-041
"Understanding Florida's Dropout Rate"

INTRODUCTION

If we are to take seriously the challenge to increase high school graduation rates, we need to redirect our research away from factors intrinsic to students and their social environment and toward those alterable characteristics of schools which have the potential to keep students actively engaged with education. Moreover, we need to begin devoting attention to the ways in which school policies and practices operate to either engage or alienate adolescents other than those enrolled in dropout prevention programs.

School improvement efforts directed toward increasing the graduation rate of general curriculum students have been hampered by lack of research on those dimensions of education which are most likely to push these students out of school. While the number of students enrolled in the general curriculum has grown dramatically since the late 1960's, it has remained the weakest component in the high school's curriculum (Adelman, 1983). Students assigned to the general track are more alienated from school and have less focused aspirations than those in either the academic or vocational tracks (Echternacht, 1976).

In an effort to understand both physical and psychological withdrawal from school, research using the concept of engagement has begun to appear (cf. Farrell, 1988; Fine, 1986; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Newmann, 1989; Wehlage, 1989).

> *...many of the school-related characteristics traditionally viewed as correlates or causes of dropout behavior, such as poor grades, truancy, and disciplinary problems, are characterized as indicators of a high degree of disengagement. Such a conceptualization takes the focus of investigation off the student and places it on an entire system of environmental factors that may affect integration [into school life] (Miller, et al., 1988, p. 467).*

In order for adolescents to persist to graduation, they must have some degree of engagement with the academic and social components of their schools. We know that the decision to drop

out is complex and the culmination of a gradual process of disengagement (Catterall, 1986). So if we are to increase graduation rates, we need to understand the signals which trigger within students this process of disengagement.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this STAR Grant research was to determine, through in depth interviews, whether any school policies or practices might be unwittingly pushing students out of school. Concentrating on those aspects of school commonly encountered by students on their route to graduation, this study sought the perspective of average students -- those enrolled in their school's general curriculum -- who constitute the largest proportion of the student body.

Student perceptions of their school's curriculum, support services, attendance policies, and social-learning climate might not be accurate. But ***if students believe them to be true***, they affect the ways in which they relate to their schools. And educators need to be aware of these perceptions so that they can evaluate consequences of their policies.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were collected during in depth interviews with 236 individuals, most of them students. Consequently, this study presents an ***insider's*** view of school policies and practices, rather than statistics or graphs. Specifically, it presents the views of students.

In order for this case study to be representative of the state, all school districts were ranked from high to low by graduation rate. One district was selected from those with graduation rates above the state mean, one at the state mean, and one below. Besides graduation rate, other sociodemographic information, such as geographic region, type of student population, and urban-rural setting, was considered in the sample selection.

Two high schools within each district were selected to reflect variations within the county. In each of these six high schools a sampling of administrators, counselors, teachers and 10th and 12th graders were interviewed. The adult population sampled included: 13 central office staff, six principals, six assistant principals for curriculum, three deans, nine guidance counselors and 21 teachers. The adult interviews were designed

to provide a context within which student perceptions could be understood.

In depth interviews were completed with 178 adolescents. Individual interviews were conducted with 101 general curriculum students, while 77 Honors and Advanced Placement students were interviewed in groups of four to six. Group interviews were designed to serve as a validity check on the individual interviews and to examine the extent to which perceptions of school varied across achievement levels.

Schools were provided with a list of the type of student to be interviewed by grade level, sex, race/ethnicity, and achievement; they then selected the specific students to be interviewed. All interviews were conducted during school hours in quiet, private rooms. They were typed directly into laptop computers rather than being tape recorded. In order to protect confidentiality, no names were recorded on any of the notes.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Few studies have taken the tack of actually asking students about their perceptions of school policies and practices. This study differed from previous research by providing students with a platform through which they could voice their responses to various features of schools which affected their academic and social engagement. Since engagement with school increases the likelihood of persisting to graduation, student perceptions of school, **whether accurate or not**, need to be taken seriously by educators.

Since data for this research were collected using open-ended interview guides, the findings reflect the perceptions of students, using their own words, rather than statistical summaries of questionnaire responses. Thematic analyses of these data indicated four major categories, or areas, of concern to students regardless of their achievement levels: Curriculum, Support Services, School Policies, and School Climate.

Unless otherwise stated, student perceptions are those of all students interviewed regardless of their achievement levels. The findings summarized below are those derived directly from the interviews with students, complemented by those with teachers, counselors, and administrators.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

GLOBAL

These findings reflect those issues and concerns which transcended the specific findings detailed under Curriculum, Support Services, School Policies, and School Climate.

1. Interviewed students gave equal emphasis to academic and social engagement as factors influencing their persistence to graduation. This study revealed that to students these two systems -- the academic and social -- were so tightly intertwined that it was impossible to separate their influence on graduation rates.

2. Schools varied in their orientation to students. The high graduation district had a facilitative orientation which sought to direct student behavior in positive ways that communicated high expectations and joint responsibility for learning. At the other end of the continuum were schools with a punitive orientation in which tight control over student behavior was stressed.

3. Overcrowding, evident in the high schools visited, had a ripple effect which impacted all areas of the schools' programs. Overcrowding contributed to tardies; increased the difficulty of students meeting with teachers outside of class time; contributed to student difficulties in being assigned to appropriate level courses; resulted in complex lunch schedules making it difficult, if not impossible, for student clubs to meet during school hours; and, decreased students' ability to get timely assistance from the guidance department and deans.

CURRICULUM

A formal curriculum was delivered in classrooms by teachers, while an informal curriculum was available from peers, coaches, activity sponsors and employers as a result of students' participation in extracurricular activities and commuting to the world of work. Mastering both curricula equipped students to engage successfully in academic and social situations.

1. Students interviewed did not carefully distinguish between the subject matter of their courses and the instructional strategy by which it was delivered. For instance, students stated that they did not learn material when they believed teachers didn't like them,

publicly embarrassed students in front of classmates, or appeared to dislike teaching.

2. The majority of students -- both general curriculum and college bound -- found their required courses boring. In particular they regarded solitary seatwork, especially end of chapter review exercises, as the dullest expenditure of class time. As a result, they regarded the assignment to read a chapter and answer the questions at its end as the least effective instructional strategy for mastering new material.

3. Among the instructional strategies which students indicated were the most effective in helping them learn new material were ample teacher explanation, student questioning, and group projects. In short, students felt that they learned material most effectively when they were active partners in the instruction process rather than passive recipients.

4. Students preferred teachers who used a variety of instructional strategies. Lecturing was tolerable if it was followed by class discussion during which students were guided to see how the new material was (a) a continuation or modification of what they had already studied, and (b) related to their present and future lives. Occasional assignments to small groups were welcomed because they provided an opportunity to become acquainted with classmates not part of a pre-existing social network.

5. Many students claimed that teachers often refused to explain either the relevance or the utility of the exercises they assigned. The most commonly offered description of a poor teacher was someone who declined to elaborate on the material set forth in the textbook.

6. According to numerous students, teachers excused their reluctance to spend time elaborating or justifying the curriculum on the grounds that the syllabus was already overcrowded. The drive to cover state mandated course objectives had two consequences: (a) it created the impression in students that it was impossible to ever master a topic; they could only get a glimpse of its intricate complexities, and (b) little could be done for those students who had trouble grasping the material on the first pass.

7. Students expressed a willingness to tackle longer, meatier assignments (e. g., term papers, panel discussions, science projects) provided they were accompanied by three conditions: (a) ample time was given to deadline, (b) work was graded and returned promptly, and (c) comments were included so that there were clear indications of how the grade was arrived at and how the work could be improved.

8. The assignment of six to seven different subject matter areas per day taxed the capacity of most general students to digest and make sense of the material. This switching of mind sets was all the more fatiguing in light of the fact that there was no down time built in to the school day during which students could catch their breath and regroup, physically and mentally.

9. Schools that made extra effort to lower barriers to students' participation in extracurricular activities (e. g., scheduling club meetings during school hours, subsidizing costs of uniforms and instruments, enlisting financial support from community businesses) generated a strong sense of affiliation and pride among their students. Schools in the high graduation rate district fostered in their students a sense of pride in being a member of an institution that was important to the community.

SUPPORT SERVICES

All schools were equipped with programs to provide students with academic and personal support. Academic support included orientation programs for students new to the school, guidance departments, and strategies for monitoring students' progress in meeting graduation requirements. Personal support took the form of programs which gave recognition to student achievement, peer support groups, and mentoring programs which fostered strong student-adult relationships.

1. Although information regarding requirements for graduation were generally presented at orientation programs for new students, freshmen and sophomores, when questioned, were often unaware of them. Students may be overwhelmed by the amount of information presented in these initial orientation meetings, and thus only attend to information relating to the more immediate demands of adapting to a new school (e.g. where are my classrooms, when do I eat lunch, etc.). At this juncture in their

academic careers, students may not perceive this information as important.

2. Many students were unaware of, or did they make use of, in-place support services (after school tutoring, homework hotlines, peer counseling, alternative programs). In some schools even teachers were unaware of the range of services available to students or the logistics of accessing them.

3. Based on descriptions by students, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators, student services in most schools were organized to serve the college bound, behavioral problems, and those enrolled in dropout prevention programs. This approach left general curriculum students to fend for themselves in dealing with both academic and social pressures. While almost all students indicated that they had a guidance counselor, a majority indicated that the assistance they received from him\her was so minimal that they used a counselor only as a last resort in solving problems.

4. Students and teachers as well as guidance counselors agreed that guidance departments were overloaded with paperwork (first and last month and a half taken up with scheduling, preparing college applications and alternative program placements); they could do little in the way of therapeutic intervention or prevention. In one school students reported having to wait up to three weeks to see a guidance counselor or dean.

5. Schools in the high graduation district prominently publicized students' individual achievements within the school (bulletin boards and photographs) and to the community (newspaper stories and bumper stickers). In contrast, in the low graduation district fewer awards were available to students, the criteria on which they were based was unclear, and high achieving students believed that teachers and administrators used them to reward their favorite students rather than those who earned them.

SCHOOL POLICIES AND THEIR ENFORCEMENT

Attendance policies -- covering behavior ranging from being tardy, cutting a class in the middle of the day, leaving the school grounds, and being truant -- occupy significant portions of educator's attention. In spite of their importance, there is almost no research on the development and enforcement of these

type of policies. Yet, they directly affect all students' engagement with learning. Findings summarized below indicate that schools varied, in systematic ways, in the types of attendance policies they implemented and their consequences.

1. Consistent with other research (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986), this study found that Honors, Advanced Placement, and General Curriculum students all held very similar views on the ways in which their schools enforced the student conduct code. While students were critical of teachers and administrators who did not maintain control, their desire for orderliness was counterbalanced by a recognition that some rules, while just, were differentially applied to varying groups of students.

2. Students in the high graduation district (regardless of achievement level) reported that consequences of rule infractions were the same for everyone regardless of academic standing or athletic ability. Conversely, students in the low graduation district reported numerous instances of punishments varying by student status.

3. Rarely did students recall teachers explaining to a class the specific guidelines they used in rule enforcement. This lack of explanation, however, did not disturb students as much as did inconsistent enforcement. Students reported examples of teachers overlooking some behavior one day and the next sending students to the office for the same offense. In these situations students learned that the rules stated were not necessarily the rules enforced.

4. Based on interviews with students, teachers, counselors, and administrators, most of the schools visited had concentrated their energies on developing systems to keep students in classes or the building without paying attention to the reasons students might want to leave.

5. Students were able to supply three major reasons for being tardy to classes: (a) the hallways were so crowded that timely movement was impossible and/or classes were so far apart that students couldn't get from one to another in the allotted time; (b) opportunities for students to interact socially with peers were limited to the time between classes; and (3) the belief that some teachers were indifferent to whether or not they were in class. The reasons students

gave for cutting classes were similar to those given for being tardy: (a) teacher indifference, (b) irrelevant course content, and (c) a desire to develop social relationships.

6. With few exceptions, most notably those in the high graduation district, students reported that their schools' policies were predicated on the basis that students would misbehave if not closely monitored at all times. This sense of constantly being under suspicion led even high achieving students to state that they frequently challenged school rules.

7. Using positive incentives (e.g., exempting students from end of semester exams for low number of tardies and absences) was more effective in getting students to attend class and be on time than punishment (e.g., deducting points from final grades for unexcused absences). The school in the high graduation district that most effectively used positive reinforcement rather than punishment, also had the most comprehensive system of providing students with incentives for staying in school.

8. Using positive incentives (e.g., allowing students to move one level down in the severity of sanctions they faced if they received no new referrals in a 30 day period) was effective in getting students to modify their behavior. Schools with higher than average graduation rates utilized forgiveness policies so that episodes of misbehavior or noncompliance could be expunged.

9. Data were skimpy on the effectiveness of the Driver's License Law (s. 322.0601, F.S.); principals and guidance counselors complained about the paperwork involved in documenting attendance under the law. Most students felt that those who dropped out would drive even without a license. Teachers said that students who returned to school merely to keep their driver's license were disruptive.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

School climate is a concept that describes the physical, social, and learning environments students encounter at school (Anderson, 1982; Brookover, et al., 1982). Since climate has been shown to be an important variable in determining school effectiveness, achievement, and satisfaction (Davis & Thomas,

1989; Raviv, Raviv, & Reisel, 1990) it has an important effect on graduation rate.

1. In schools with higher than average graduation rates, principals communicated their mission statement publicly and repeatedly to students and staff as well as to the community at large. These mission statements guided the modification of course offerings and the implementation of policies designed to facilitate the accumulation of credits necessary for graduation. Moreover, students as well as faculty knew what the mission statement was and how it influenced school programs.

2. Schools with a clean appearance and displays of positively worded signs had higher levels of student and staff morale than did those that were dirty, marked by graffiti, or had negatively worded signs posted around the campus and in the building. Examples of negatively worded signs were, "No Students Admitted" and "Anyone Caught Defacing Property Will Be Prosecuted To The Full Extent Of The Law". Positively worded messages included, "For The Protection Of Our Students We Ask That All Visitors Please Sign In At The Main Office" and "All Students Can Learn."

3. None of the teachers interviewed had attended, nor were they aware of, inservice programs dealing with racial and ethnic diversity in the work place. Consequently, students rarely reported instances of classroom instruction or discussion designed to help them understand different racial and ethnic groups.

4. In all schools visited, administrators and teachers seemed unaware of, or unconcerned with, significant cultural differences between ethnic subgroups (e.g., African Americans and Caribbean blacks; Hispanic surnamed students from Central and South America). Since cultural sensitivity on the part of schools contributes to students' engagement with learning, a school perceived as being insensitive or oblivious to the cultural differences among its student body has diminished holding power.

5. Schools have been slow to respond to the increasing diversity of their student body. Frequently the only bilingual adults on campus were foreign language teachers. This resulted in students and parents of limited English proficiency having difficulty getting help from monolingual front office staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CURRICULUM

1. In order to arouse students' interest and attention, high school teachers should receive inservice training on how to use a variety of instructional strategies, e.g., cooperative learning, inquiry approaches, and critical thinking.

2. In addition, staff workshops on teaching in multicultural settings could increase the likelihood that classroom instructional activities would contribute to interracial and interethnic cooperation and respect.

3. To reduce the intellectual fatigue associated with a six to seven course load per day and to foster deeper engagement with the material, alternatives to the 50 minute period should be explored; for example, assigning half the number of courses for double the number of periods.

4. Schools should reduce barriers to students' participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Efforts should be undertaken to include a greater diversity of students in high visibility, all-school positions (e.g. student government, varsity athletics, cheerleading, and marching band).

5. Club and team activities should be scheduled several times a month during school hours in order to give students who do not have personal transportation the opportunity to explore and join.

6. Efforts to increase the number and range of students participating in co- and extracurricular activities will involve subsidizing the costs of running for student government, purchase of athletic uniforms and band instruments, and scholarships to summer cheerleading and music camps. Arranging for these subsidies will require that principals actively solicit the financial support of the business community (in the form of donations of equipment and prizes).

SUPPORT SERVICES

1. In order to increase the effectiveness of orientation programs, schools should categorize the information provided in these programs into several specialized presentations over the course of the students' first

semester at school. These presentations could take the form of an orientation class in which students were tested over requirements and available support programs, and/or they could take the form of periodic orientation assemblies in which testimonials from seniors would highlight the importance and usefulness of the information.

2. In order to strengthen student-counselor relationships, the same guidance counselor should be assigned to a student throughout his/her high school career. A counselor specializing in college programs and entrance requirements, financial aid, job placement, and other topics of interest to graduating seniors could supplement the assistance provided by the grade-level counselor.

3. Students in grades 9-12 should be provided with one-on-one assistance from a guidance counselor when determining class schedules so that monitoring of progress toward meeting graduation requirements could be optimized.

4. Reassigning routine aspects of scheduling to clerical staff would free up counselors to listen to and talk with students who have started to lose interest in school.

5. The schools' formal recognition system should be broadened and the inclusion criteria made explicit so that all students would know what an award meant and on what basis it was conferred.

6. The school's formal recognition system should involve the surrounding community. Press releases and solicited support from civic organizations and private industry could enhance the recognition programs already in place in all schools.

SCHOOL POLICIES AND THEIR ENFORCEMENT

1. School districts could increase student engagement and compliance with school rules if they would base student conduct policies on positive reinforcement of desired behavior rather than punitive approaches.

2. Schools should implement an authoritative, as opposed to an authoritarian, model of control. This model consists of: (a) communication of high expectations; (b) consistent and reasonable enforcement of rules; and, (c) emphasis on shared responsibility between school and

student for successful completion of graduation requirements.

3. Consequences for infractions of school rules should be the same for all students regardless of academic or athletic ability.

4. Teachers should explain to their classes the guidelines they use in enforcement of classroom rules. Teachers then should be consistent in their enforcement of these rules.

5. Faculty should cooperatively examine their own and their school's tardy policies to explore reasons for students' noncompliance (e.g., overcrowded facilities, need for socializing, boredom) and come up with incentives for promptness.

6. Schools should reexamine the way students currently get assigned to lunch shifts to determine if it interferes with opportunities for peer interaction. Options for lunch shift assignments include homogeneous grade level (e.g., 1st lunch shift for sophomores); space (e.g., separate room or quadrant of lunchroom for different lunch shifts); or off-campus privileges for seniors.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

1. Principals and their faculty should review their current mission statement to determine if it guides policy and practice. Once a statement is agreed upon, it should be communicated regularly to students, staff and the local community.

2. In order to be sensitive to the needs of a culturally diverse population, schools should recruit administrative, instructional, and clerical staff to reflect the ethnic makeup of their student body.

3. Inservice training in cultural diversity for administrators and faculty could increase awareness and sensitivity to students from different cultural backgrounds.

4. It is important that schools provide students with solidarity-building rituals as well as modeling the pride they seek to engender in their students. Ways to increase students' affiliation with their school include: (a) holding pep rallies consistently, with participation by faculty and administration; (b) publicizing the school's athletic and academic

achievements to the community; (c) expanding the range of students recognized for their accomplishments in academics and community service; and (d) mobilizing students' participation in the upkeep and beautification of the school plant.

5. Signs around campus should be worded positively.

6. Districts should explore ways of alleviating overcrowded conditions (e.g., staggered schedules, year round schooling, night classes).

CHAPTER 1

THE ROUTE TO GRADUATION

PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL CURRICULUM STUDENTS

> *From the standpoint of school policy and practice, it is essential for educators to become knowledgeable about the way school can be perceived differently and can affect different groups of adolescents in different ways (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 380).*

The research summarized in this report was conducted for the Office of Policy Research & Improvement, Florida State Department of Education, and supported through funding by the Florida Institute of Government (STAR Grant #89-041). The purpose of the study was to determine whether any school policies or practices might be unwittingly pushing students out of school. Concentrating on those aspects of school commonly encountered by students on their route to graduation, this study sought the perspective of average students - those who are in the general curriculum (or general level courses) of their high schools and who constitute the largest proportion of the student body.

If we are to take seriously the challenge to increase high school graduation rates, we need to redirect our research away from factors intrinsic to students and their social environment and toward those alterable characteristics of schools which have the potential to keep students actively engaged with education. Moreover, we need to begin devoting attention to the ways in which school policies and practices operate to either engage or alienate adolescents other than those in dropout prevention programs. Consequently, this study was designed to determine, through in depth interviews, specific policies and practices

which high school students indicated affected their academic and social engagement with school.

Student perceptions of their school's curriculum, support services, school policies, or social-learning climate might not be accurate. Nevertheless, if students believe them to be true, they affect the ways in which they relate to their schools. And educators need to be aware of these perceptions so that they can evaluate consequences of their policies. In order to provide a context within which to understand student perceptions, teachers, school administrators, and central office staff were also interviewed as part of this research.

FLORIDA'S RESPONSE TO DROPOUT PROJECTIONS

Florida has aggressively responded to projections (Hodgkinson, 1988) indicating that the trend of early school leaving is likely to increase during the 1990's. Beginning in 1984 the legislature allocated $1,000,000 specifically to restructure the state's efforts to meet the needs of high risk youth. The following year a Dropout Prevention Center was created at the University of Miami to identify exemplary programs and assist local districts in standardizing definitions and data collection activities. In 1986 a Dropout Prevention Act, specifying five different program components, was passed to encourage school districts to create and implement comprehensive programs to assist potential dropouts in making successful transitions to productive adult lives (Florida Statute 230.2313). However, the multifaceted school district programs established

under this legislation meet the needs of only a small percentage of Florida's student population, those most at-risk of dropping out. Consequently, Florida's graduation rate remains unacceptably low because students other than those defined as "at-risk" also drop out, sometimes in large numbers. Thus if Florida schools are to increase their graduation rates, they must move beyond reliance on special programs for those at the bottom and direct attention to the ways in which school policies and practices foster academic and social disengagement among general curriculum students.

GENERAL CURRICULUM STUDENTS

School improvement efforts directed toward increasing the graduation rate of general curriculum students have been hampered by lack of research on those dimensions of education which are most likely to push these students out of school. Studies of differing curricular tracks have tended to emphasize the basis on which students are assigned to them (cf. Jones, 1987; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1976) or contrast academic experiences of those in college preparatory courses to those in vocational or remedial courses (cf. Adelman, 1983; Davis & Haller, 1981; Natriello, Alexander, & Pallas, 1989; Vanfossen, Jones & Spade, 1987). The educational experiences of those in the middle have been left largely unexplored. And yet, in the decade between the late 1960's and late 1970's, the percentage of students in the general curriculum increased from 12 percent to 42.5 percent (Adelman, 1983). There is no indication that this trend has been reversed.

While scant, there is evidence in the research literature supporting the proposition that educators need to examine more closely the experiences of those in the general curriculum in order to increase high school graduation rates. As the size of the student population assigned to the general curriculum has grown it has begun to set the "tone" of a school's social-learning climate (Adelman, 1983). The general curriculum, however, has remained the weakest component in the high school's curriculum (Adelman, 1983) and students enrolled in it are more alienated from school and have less focused aspirations than those in either the academic or vocational tracks (Echternacht, 1976).

In a national study using follow-up data from the High School and Beyond Study (Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987) general and vocational track students, as compared to those in the academic curriculum, were less committed to academic goals, had poorer classroom discipline, and received more negative treatment by teachers. These authors concluded, "...students in nonacademic tracks are not *[emphasis in original]* given an environment that encourages them to increase their performance and their educational and occupational aspirations" (p. 116).

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

In an effort to understand both physical and psychological withdrawal from school, research using the concept of engagement has begun to appear (cf. Farrell, 1988; Fine, 1986; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Newman, 1989; Wehlage, 1989).

> *...many of the school-related characteristics traditionally viewed as correlates or causes of dropout behavior, such as poor grades, truancy, and disciplinary problems, are characterized as indicators of a high degree of disengagement. Such a conceptualization takes the focus of investigation off the student and places it on an entire system of environmental factors that may affect integration [into school life] (Miller, et al.,1988, p. 467).*

Engagement may be thought of as a continuum with integration into the life of the school on one end and alienation or disengagement on the other. As researchers have begun working with this concept, they have divided it into two components: academic and social. Academic engagement is used to describe the ways in which students respond to their schools' formal curriculum, including its content, academic demands, and learning tasks (Miller, et.al, 1988; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). An analysis of the High School and Beyond data by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Peng, 1983) determined that lack of academic success was the school-related reason most frequently cited as a cause of dropping out. Thus, disengagement from the academic demands of school increase the likelihood of a student's not persisting to graduation. Wehlage and his colleagues (1989) have defined three impediments to academic engagement.

> *These impediments to engagement include: (1) Schoolwork is not extrinsically motivating for many students because achievement is not tied to any explicit and valued goal; (2) The dominant learning process pursued in schools is too narrow in that it is highly abstract, verbal, sedentary, individualistic, competitive and controlled by others as opposed to concrete, problem-oriented, active, kinesthetic, cooperative and autonomous....(3) Classroom learning is often stultifying because educators are obsessed with the 'coverage' of subject matter; this makes*

> *school knowledge superficial, and also intrinsically unsatisfying... (p. 179).*

Social engagement encompasses interpersonal relationships and participation in the life of the school, including its co-curricular and extracurricular programs. It is "...*the degree to which the student has developed comfortable, cooperative relationships with others (peers, teachers, counselors, administrators)*" (Miller, et al., p. 467-468). Nearly half the reasons cited by adolescents for having dropped out of school related to some aspect of within school relationships (Pittman, 1986).

In order for adolescents to persist to graduation they must have some degree of engagement with the academic and social components of their schools; failure in either of these areas may be counterbalanced, to some degree, by success in the other. That is, an academically successful student who has few friends and doesn't participate in any school sponsored clubs or activities, may still find school a satisfying experience. Likewise, the student who is academically marginal may be so involved in the social life of the school that he or she also will persist to graduation. Those most likely to leave school before graduation are those who are both academically and socially estranged from their school. This typology, however, still leaves a large group of students for whom it is difficult to predict the likelihood of their graduating. These students are passing their classes, have some friends, and may or may not participate in sports or extracurricular activities. Thus, they have some degree of engagement with the academic and/or social

components of their schools. But their engagement may be tenuous, and academic difficulties or confrontations with the authority structure may convince them to leave school before graduation.

We know that the decision to drop out is complex and the culmination of a gradual process of disengagement (Catterall, 1986). So if we are to increase graduation rates, we need to understand the signals which trigger this process of disengagement. Some of the research in this area has sought to tap into the student's perspective, generally through the use of questionnaires. Few studies have taken the tack of actually asking students about their perceptions of school. This study differed from previous research by providing students with a platform through which **they** could voice their responses to various features of their schools which affected their academic and social engagement. This study revealed how tightly these two systems were intertwined - to the point where it became impossible to neatly consign school experiences to one realm or the other.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Case study methodology was used for this research. Such an approach "offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon" (Merriam, 1988, p. 32). Most research studies concerned with high school graduation have relied on questionnaires; this approach assumes that researchers know the appropriate questions to ask and the range of possible

answers. Additionally, many of these researchers have not bothered to administer the instruments to students, but have assumed that educators could accurately report their experiences for them. When qualitative approaches have been used, they have been confined to small populations of students who are either most likely to dropout or enrolled in alternative education programs (Fine, 1985; Miller, et al., 1988; Wehlage, et al, 1989).

In response to the limitations of previous research, data for this study were collected during in depth interviews with 236 individuals, most of them students. Consequently, this study presents an insider's view of school policies and practices, rather than statistics or graphs. Complementing the sophisticated statistical data that Management Information Services (MIS) currently provides the DoE, this research tapped the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators as they reflected on their experiences in schools.

SAMPLE

In order for this case study to be representative of districts within the state, a variety of sampling procedures were used. First, the decision was made to collect comprehensive data from three districts rather than surface data from a larger sampling. To insure variability in the sample, school districts were ranked from high to low by graduation rate. One district was selected from those with graduation rates above the state mean, one at the state mean, and one below. Besides graduation rate, other sociodemographic information was considered such as:

geographic region, type of student population, urban-rural setting. In cooperation with the Office of Policy Research and Improvement, Department of Education, three districts were selected. Their participation was secured by the Commissioner of Education.

In each of the three selected districts, directors of student services, curriculum, and testing were interviewed; a total of 13 central office staff were interviewed. Two high schools within each district were then selected for in depth study. These schools were selected to reflect variations within the county. In each of these six high schools a sampling of administrators, counselors, teachers and 10th and 12th grade students were interviewed. The adult population sampled included: six principals, six assistant principals for curriculum, three deans, nine guidance counselors, and 21 teachers. The adult interviews were designed to provide a context within which student perceptions could be understood.

Student Sample.

Schools were provided with a list of the type of student to be interviewed by grade level, sex, race/ethnicity, and ability level. The schools were then free to select the specific students who fit these descriptors. This means that the researchers did **not** select students **they** thought would tell them what they wanted to hear, but instead interviewed those students sent to them by school personnel.

Since time constraints did not permit interviewing students at all grade levels, interviews were limited to those in the 10th

and 12th grades. The 10th grade was selected since this was the beginning grade in several of the high schools in the sample. Seniors were interviewed to provide insights of those who were nearing the end of their high school career.

In depth interviews were completed with 178 adolescents in the six high schools. Individual interviews were conducted with 101 general curriculum students, while 77 Honors and Advanced Placement students were interviewed in groups of four to six. The group interviews were designed to serve as a validity check on the individual interviews and to examine the extent to which perceptions of school varied across achievement levels. One of the researchers was bilingual and thus able to interview Hispanic students in Spanish or English depending on their preference. Appendix A provides descriptions of the student and adult populations interviewed for this research.

PROCEDURES

Instrument Development.

Interview protocols were developed based upon a review of the at-risk and dropout literature. The purpose of the student interviews was to tap their perceptions of school in terms of both academic and social engagement. Under Academic Engagement there were eight families, or sets, of questions: Teacher-Learning Strategies; High School Graduation & Aspirations; Instructional Context; School Policies (school rules, tardies, homework, language other than English); Study Hall; Academic Perceptions of Self and Others; Study Skills; and, Evaluation of Schooling. Social Engagement included four families of

questions: School Climate; Student Behavior; Interpersonal Relationships (student-teacher and student-student); and, Extracurricular Activities. Administrator, teacher, and support staff interview guides were composed of five families of questions exploring perceptions of students, policies, curriculum, relationships, and educational context. The interview guides have been published as a technical report.

The interview protocols were open-ended enough to elicit the individual experiences and beliefs of those being interviewed while containing enough structure to permit comparisons across respondents. Care was taken to word the questions neutrally so that students could not anticipate the answers desired by the interviewers. Moreover, the researchers were skilled interviewers and trained to avoid unintentional verbal and nonverbal cues in response to answers.

First, drafts of the interview protocols were submitted to the DoE's Office of Policy Research & Improvement for review and revision. The interviews were then pilot tested and questions which provided little relevant information or which were redundant were deleted.

The Interviews.

All interviews were conducted during school hours in quiet, private rooms in order to insure confidentiality. They were typed directly into laptop computers rather than being tape recorded. In order to protect confidentiality, no names were recorded on any of the notes. Data on race/ethnicity, sex, school, and beginning and ending times of the interviews were

recorded for all interviews. For students, information on grade level and curriculum level were also recorded. Subject matter taught was recorded for teachers and position (i.e., principal, counselor) for administrators and staff.

Data Analysis.

Descriptive summaries, written after each school visit, were used to develop a series of coding categories to be used in the analysis of the interview data. (Coding categories are included as Appendix B.) Each researcher coded approximately one-fourth of the interviews, with 10 percent of them being multiply coded to insure reliability. To facilitate analysis, the Ethnograph program (Seidel, 1988) was used. This program is designed to assist qualitative researchers in many of the mechanical aspects associated with text data analysis.

Since data for this research were collected using open-ended interview guides, the findings reflect the perceptions of students, using their own words, rather than statistical summaries of questionnaire responses. Thematic analyses of these data indicated four major categories, or areas, of concern to students regardless of their achievement levels: Curriculum, Support Services, School Policies, and School Climate.

OVERVIEW OF REMAINING CHAPTERS

This report, then, is based on data collected through in depth interviews with 236 individuals, 178 of them high school students. The interview guides were developed after a thorough review of the research literature on at-risk students and

dropouts. Based on this review, the concepts of academic and social engagement were used to generate the interview guides and subsequent analysis of the data.

There are five additional chapters in this report. Chapter 2 is a description of the formal and informal curriculum from the perspective of students. Chapter 3, Support Services, covers the topics of guidance, alternative programs, and orientation to school. Attendance policies and their enforcement are discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter includes discussion of orientation to school rules, tardies, cutting classes, and truancy. Chapter 5 deals with the School Climate. Issues covered range from the physical plant to cultural diversity. The last chapter contains a summary of the findings of this study along with a set of recommendations for improving the capacity of schools to see students through to graduation.

CHAPTER 2

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

As students travel the route to graduation, they encounter two kinds of knowledge: a formal curriculum which is delivered in classrooms by subject matter specialists and an informal curriculum available outside the classroom from peers, sponsors, coaches, and employers whose main instructional emphasis is imparting values and interpersonal competence. A mastery of both curricula equips students to engage successfully in academic and social situations. The first section of this chapter summarizes what general curriculum students had to say about their experiences in the classroom. The second section summarizes what they had to say about their schools' informal curriculum.

THE FORMAL CURRICULUM

In their interviews, students did not carefully distinguish between the subject matter of their courses and the modes by which it was delivered. When students talked about what they were learning, their descriptions usually included references to the instructional strategies teachers used to convey the material. Moreover, they almost always commented on the way they and teachers related to each other and how that relationship affected the amount they learned. Therefore, though this chapter begins with students' describing the pacing and coverage of their courses, it is immediately followed by an account of the instructional strategies that they found most and least effective in helping them learn subject matter. The section concludes with statements about the kinds of relationships that developed

between teachers and students in the classroom. Because students did not separate the cognitive and affective domains of learning, their feelings about how they were treated affected their capacity and willingness to master the intellectual content of their courses.

PACING AND COVERAGE

A majority of the students interviewed at each of the three districts reported that they found their required courses boring. It has become a commonplace among educators (including several administrators and teachers interviewed for this study) that the source of this complaint can be found in television's predominant position as baby sitter and entertainer to the current generation of adolescents.

> *Nowadays the excitement level of everything else is so much higher. Fifteen years ago you could hold them. Today they are bombarded with media buzz.*

Several students commented on this hypothesis - namely, that classroom teachers cannot compete with the visual and aural resources of television. Most were skeptical about this comparison, which pits instruction by a single, live individual against a musical or dramatic extravaganza mounted by a team of professional artists. *"You can't compare a teacher to a video. That's ridiculous. Students know better than that."* Some objected to the image that adult society at large projects about adolescents; namely, that they are easily manipulated consumers who have no interest in learning. One of the most forceful impressions these general curriculum students made, and wanted relayed to educational decision-makers, was that they did want to

learn but were being stymied by a frustrating combination of very low and very high demands on their cognitive capabilities.

An example of low cognitive demand was the widespread complaint that many teachers simply did not spend much time teaching. After a brief bit of instruction, seatwork was regularly assigned, most commonly, end of chapter exercises from textbooks.

> *They don't teach the work. They just put it on the board: 'Here's the assignment for the day. Get to work. Outline the chapter and do the chapter review.' Five out of seven of my classes do that.*

> *The teacher I learned the least from was the one who made the work dull: 'Do this page and then I'll check the work.' The teacher I learned the most from was the one who made it interesting, who was outgoing and talked about the subject, instead of assigning a page number in the book.*

In addition to a great deal of class time being devoted to solitary seatwork, many students claimed their teachers refused to explain either the relevance or the utility of the exercises they assigned. From the pupils' point of view, a poor teacher was someone who declined to elaborate beyond the propositions set forth in the course's textbook.

> *One new guy just goes by the book. We talk about it but we don't learn anything. He doesn't give us anything that isn't the book.*

Such constriction in frame of reference made it difficult for students to find any personal reason for mastering the material, other than the aversive motivation that non-compliance would be punished.

Especially troublesome to students was the unwillingness of math and science teachers to take time to work through problems

on the board step by step that would have helped them grasp how and why certain procedures had to be used.

> *I never understand math. It's hard. We need more tutoring and better explanations. 'Your past teachers were not good. You should have learned that last year. You should have.'*

> *I never caught on to math. I don't understand negatives. Each week it gets bigger and bigger. Forty five minutes is not enough time to get individual help. I know so many people who do not understand math.*

> *I learned nothing in geometry. We went over it once. He wouldn't go back. It didn't make any sense. Just tell me what to do. You don't have to give explanations. Just do it [solve the problem]. Explanations don't help. What matters is the application [a fully worked out example]. . . I did not ever understand what order to put the definitions in.*

> *They don't try to explain. Like in chemistry, he thinks we're supposed to get it the first time. In my geometry and biology class, I don't understand their steps. I try to keep talking to them. She yelled at me: 'You have to read it through.' I didn't understand the instructions. 'You haven't read it through.' I didn't understand it. She should tell me where you're supposed to read to answer the question.*

According to numerous students, teachers excused their reluctance to spend any time justifying the stipulated curriculum on the grounds that the syllabus was already overcrowded. As a result of state-mandated course objectives, teachers had to "cover" a large number of topics. This drive for coverage produced in students the impression that it was impossible to ever master any single topic: they could get only a hint of its intricate complexities.

> *Black students don't learn anything about their culture. We don't do anything in depth, not even white history.*

Teachers recognized that the plethora of topics they had to cover made students anxious. Some responded by selecting a few essential concepts to concentrate on, but even that did not allay students worries about passing exams and getting promoted. A math teacher described the problem this way:

> *I'm snowed over, so I emphasize this material: 'If you know these four concepts and can apply them...' Students want to memorize, not understand. 'Give me a formula so that I can plug in the numbers. Don't expect me to figure the concept out.' Often teachers push data, not concepts.*

The press to move quickly through the crammed syllabus had another consequence: little could be done for those students who had had trouble grasping the material on the first pass. The result was that when these students were promoted into second and third year courses - in foreign language and math, particularly - great discrepancies in skill mastery emerged. Students in group interviews complained about the presence of these slow learners; that is, those who had not mastered basic concepts and operations. They kept the rest of the class from moving ahead as quickly through the material as the teacher said they needed to.

> *The slow ones can't catch up because the teacher doesn't help them. For example, my History teacher says to other students about a really slow girl in our class--I think she may be retarded: 'Don't bother with her'.*

In contrast to simplification and rushing within individual classes, the combined sum of each class's distinctive version of worthwhile knowledge formed a high cognitive demand that taxed the capabilities of general curriculum students. Hardly any recognition was given to the fact that students and teachers were operating under quite different intellectual conditions.

Teachers receive specialized training in their subject matter area and practice their skills over the course of many semesters. Each day they review the same material three to five times, whereas students have to adjust their mind-set to as many as seven different, new kinds of academic discourse. As they rotated through their periods - from mathematics and language to history and science - hardly any class time was dedicated to re-initiating students, through the use of advanced organizers, to the distinctive premises and procedures each of the different disciplines employed.

This switching of mind-sets was fatiguing to many students, but was especially stressful to general curriculum students for whom high school was not wholly a preparation for college but also a place to socialize. Yet, there was almost no down-time built into the school day during which students could catch their breath and regroup, mentally and physically, unless they broke the rules. (See Chapter 4 on tardies and cutting.) Lunchtime was more often rushed than relaxing, and many students reported (a fact confirmed on their side by teachers) that in the last two classes of the day, both attentiveness and instructional rigor fell off considerably.

The no-credit study hall, wherein students might have had the time to discover any connection between all their courses, was no longer an option available to most students. The only students who had a study hall were athletes there on mandatory assignment because they were in jeopardy of losing their eligibility.

In terms then of its pacing and coverage, it could be said that the curriculum, in the experience of most general curriculum students, moved very slowly and very superficially across many different subjects. Because their coursework did not contain any interdisciplinary overviews that might have served as intellectual resting points, they experienced the curriculum as an ordeal, a series of hurdles that stood between them and the finish line, where the diploma lay waiting.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Across all districts and ability levels, students reported that the instructional strategy they found least effective was the assignment - during class time - of textbook reading and answering questions at the end of the chapter. In general, any instructional strategy that did not include ample opportunities for asking questions to help clarify context and meaning was disliked by students.

> *You ask them a question, they don't have any time for it.You say the simplest thing. 'I already went over that.'*

> *The teacher I learned the most from didn't yell if you raised your hand. She wouldn't get upset. You could ask anything. She would stop whatever she was doing to help you. Here it's: 'Can't you see what I'm doing!' You sit there with a blank piece of paper. They have a super [superior] attitude. You raise your hand. 'Wait til I finish.' And then you forget what you were going to ask and then you're totally lost. I already read it at home before I asked and she tells me to read it when I already have.*

> *The teacher I learn the most from doesn't just say 'outline the chapter.' He goes over it, he tells you a story about it, makes you understand it. He doesn't snap at you for asking a question.*
>
> *I would change teachers' way of teaching. Instead of their being scared of us asking them a question, I'd make them go over the chapters and answer any questions. Now it's: 'There's the dictionary.' 'Look in your book.' 'I'm not going to do the work for you.'*

Teachers who utilized whole class lecturing exclusively, and who actively discouraged interruption, did not hold the attention of general curriculum students. Many of those who lectured were described as speaking in a monotone, sounding bored with their subject, perhaps the result of having talked about it for years mostly to themselves.

What students relished was variety in instructional techniques (Finn, 1989). Lecturing, for example, was acceptable when it was followed by class discussion in which students were guided to see how the new material was a continuation or modification of a principle or topic they had already studied. Discussion was the vehicle through which students expected their teachers to establish the connection between what they were studying and their present and future lives. "*I seemed to learn more when teachers relate the past to today. That helps.*"

They enjoyed the occasional assignment of work in small groups because it provided an opportunity to become acquainted with classmates not part of their existing social network. However, when learning about a topic was entirely the responsibility of group effort, students expressed impatience with those team members who did not execute their own assignment

seriously. Thus, though group projects had some appeal as a way to break down preexisting social arrangements, the continuation of the individual grading system tended to pit the doers against the procrastinators.

Students wanted their assignments to be clear, but not simple-minded. They reported having as little as an hour's homework a day primarily because their teachers often allowed them to use the last portion of class time to do the next day's assignment. These homework assignments required neither much thinking or writing; they consisted primarily of locating and copying the boldfaced, italicized definitions their textbook asked for in end-of-chapter review questions.

In contrast to these low level demands, students said they wished teachers would give them more worthwhile work.

> *The teacher I learned the most from? The one that gave the hardest tests. It forces you to study harder. The teacher who is hard is really your best friend.*

They were ready and willing to tackle longer, meatier assignments (e.g., term papers, book reports, science projects) as long as they were accompanied by three conditions: (1) ample time was given to deadline, (2) work was graded and returned relatively promptly (teachers tended to delay returning lengthy assignments), and (3) comments were included so that there were clear indications of how the grade was arrived at and how the work could be improved.

In sum, students despised busywork. They realized they learned very little from unchallenging textbook assignments which

simply asked them to retrieve something that was stated somewhere.

> *The teacher I learned the least from? My science teacher. He would give us busywork: he would give us an exercise copying down notes out of the book while he read the newspaper, or played on the computer. Or he would talk about current events. He was fun but I didn't learn anything.*

> *My history teacher would spend half the class speaking about his house, about what his wife did. Everybody would be laughing. The other half of the time we did busy work.*

> *Some classes I don't learn anything in. You don't use what you learn: You memorize and spit it back on a test, like accounting last year. The work was copying from the workbook and turning it in.*

> *The older you get, the more learning is important to you. When I was a sophomore, I liked easy classes. They don't have anything planned. They just give you stuff to keep you busy.*

To illustrate the point that students felt shortchanged by low cognitive demands, it should be noted they reserved their harshest scorn for teachers who did not exercise firm control over their classrooms. They were upset by unruly or lax classrooms where hardly any learning took place. Especially in the low graduation district where school administrators stressed the importance of control, students reported incidents of teachers breaking down in class and crying, frustrated by their failure to manage behavior.

> *She has to stop every two minutes to tell the class to be quiet. The office doesn't do anything when she sends kids down 'cause they know there are problems.*

Resource specialists working with the 'trouble-maker' population in small, pull-out situations interpreted the behavior of disruptive students in regular classes as a disguise to cover the fact that they had not, or could not, do the work.

> *A lot of the way they act is a defense. They have serious reading deficiencies. They'd rather cut up than read out loud. Once they can, they aren't afraid they will be embarrassed.... 'I'd rather be in trouble than say I can't read in front of people.' Reading problems generate behavior problems.*

Students directed their highest praise toward those teachers who were "strict but nice." Those who balanced concern with subject matter mastery with an appreciation of what motivated students to learn were singled out by students as the teachers they learned the most from. For such individuals, students were willing to apply themselves toward mastering the subject matter. Rigorous yet humane instruction was the best help a student could receive on the route to graduation.

RELATIONSHIPS

The most noticeable difference between the high and low graduation district was in the way teachers related to the student body. In the high graduation district the instructional, like the administrative, staff operationalized the commitment to seeing their charges through to graduation by (1) communicating their faith in students' ability to master the requisite literacy and numeracy skills, (2) conveying the caring attitude of an extended family within an institutional context, and (3) going beyond the boundaries of their job descriptions to help students who had difficulties learning.

This commitment and concern was attested to by statements students made in which they echoed the principle of shared responsibility which had been enunciated by the administrators and teachers in this district: "*As long as a person makes effort, somebody [on staff] will be there to help.*" Particularly in the smaller of the two schools in the high graduation district (which had to counter the rural tradition of early withdrawal from high school to start a family and enter the local agrarian economy) a simulacrum of the extended family was created. A staff member was designated - anyone from an assistant principal to a food handler - to supply ongoing motivational support. These adults acted as in-school relatives (helpers of athletes were actually called "mothers"). For example, the secretarial staff adopted members of the wrestling team and saw to it that their absences were explained and that missed work was forwarded home and returned on time. In this school previously unsuccessful students, those who were vulnerable and easily discouraged, were assigned an advocate, someone who could negotiate the obstacles to graduation, particularly falling behind grade level. (See Chapter 1, "The Route to Graduation.")

Students had nothing but praise for those teachers who were so invested in their progress that they would meet with them before and after school, on and off school property, to go over material they didn't understand first time around.

> *Whenever I needed help, he'd spend time with me. After once or twice, most teachers stop, but he'd spend time with you.*

In contrast, teachers in the low graduation district took a skeptical view of students' willingness and capacity to learn. In

fact, public disparagement of their abilities was not uncommon. It was no coincidence that in a school where teachers yelled at students and called them "stupid," the teaching staff evacuated the building within five minutes of the last bell, leaving anyone in search of additional assistance to fend for themselves.

Mutual respect and shared responsibility were the foundation upon which the high graduation district was able to build their sense of a supportive extended family. There, problems in learning were owned jointly by staff and students.

> *We point out how they can do it. 'If you do this [e.g., attend night school and summer school], you can make it. Nobody can do it for you. Mama can't get it by shouting.' What is important is support, regardless of whom it is coming from. [They realize] 'there is a path and someone is showing me how to walk on it.'*

Since both parties accepted a portion of the responsibility for subpar achievement or disruptive behavior, they had to agree on a plan of action that would lead to better outcomes. In practical terms, that meant assigning adults to work with every student at risk of not graduating. By demonstrating faith in the student's and the school's capacity to redress deficiencies, these partners in progress succeeded in "scaling the 24 credit mountain".

In the low graduation district, it was more common to hear stories indicative of a sharp demarcation between teachers and students. In these two schools, teachers saw themselves as professionals dispensing knowledge; students acquired that knowledge by dint of consistent effort. A majority of the teachers interviewed did not view the attainment of the diploma as a shared goal. In fact, some vocational program students

reported feeling an aversion on the part of some of their academic teachers.

> *The teachers place you in your cliques. Some can't stand you; some like us. Basically it's their attitude. It's a negative attitude: 'You're in vocational.' When you walk in, they turn their cold back on you. [Who does?] It's the more serious subjects, the two English teachers. They have their high degrees. They look down on you for being vocational.*

Lack of interest in non-college bound students was by no means the rule in this district, the only one of the three, by the way, with a service and agribusiness economy developed enough to absorb high school completers and non-completers alike. The researchers on several occasions were sought out by teachers dedicated to helping the academically marginal. Here, for example, was the plan of action of a reading resource specialist who ran a six week crash course in test taking techniques for students who had failed the SSAT II:

> *Everyone has the ability. I give them a positive attitude. I go get them from other classes. I call their parents at night. I tell them: 'I can get them through high school. You get them to my classes.'*

Yet her class slogan was "You don't/You won't" [pass the SSAT/graduate]. Graduation was pretty much the student's goal alone. "*These kids don't have any one person interested in them,*" said this specialist, and that included the school's faculty and administration. What made this teacher's personal commitment so poignant was that her position was about to be removed from the district's list of categorically funded programs. In the district's new school-based management economy there were no

assurances that principals would use discretionary monies to retain remedial or compensatory programs.

> *The superintendent wants the program but he says: 'here's the money, spend it anywhere you need.' Some principals are in the red. Principals don't have tenure; they can't afford to be in the red.*

In sum, there were teachers everywhere dedicated to seeing their students through to graduation, but the ones who were succeeding were the ones who had the full financial and moral support of their school and district administration.

THE INFORMAL CURRICULUM

The informal curriculum refers to those occasions at school outside of regular classes which provided opportunities for students to learn skills necessary to function effectively as responsible adult members of society.

> *You learn things not just in class but in the halls: How mean some people are, how ignorant some people are; how some people take advantage, how some people are easily taken advantage of.*

Skills such as leadership, cooperation, and planning were not necessary for success in academics. The non-academic dimension of schooling supplied the occasions for exercising valuable inter- and intra-personal skills. Surprisingly, most teachers interviewed said that they believed learning values such as hard work, self-improvement, and patience was the most important part of a high school education; however, they readily admitted that the short term responsibility of delivering course content

frequently took precedence over the long range goal of producing proficient citizens.

Three areas within the non-academic dimension were examined to assess the extent to which these skills were acquired and mastered by general curriculum students: (1) co-curricular activities, (2) extracurricular activities, and (3) commuting to and from the world of work. Each of these areas required that students make a contribution to a group enterprise. Learning how to engage in socially valuable interpersonal transactions was conspicuously absent from the decontextualized intellectual demands students routinely faced. Success in school was determined for the most part on students' individual and isolated effort. Rare was the classroom teacher or school district that had devised a grading system which included performance on cooperative learning or group problem-solving tasks. Therefore, those occasions where students learned to work toward a common goal deserve close scrutiny.

CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The co-curricular activity that most closely approximated the behavior of adult citizens was student government, specifically, the process of choosing class leaders and student council representatives. Could it be that the phenomenon of voter apathy which has reached alarming proportions in local and national elections has its roots in the campaigns for high school class officers? How skeptical were average students about the people who ran for office? The answer was very. They reported that the same few people, usually the "Preps," (college bound

students whose parents know the value of a service-laden resume) appeared on the ballots every year.

> *Student government is for the really smart kids, the more popular ones. If you're smart, you're popular here. The same people run the student government from the 9th grade on. They always win.*

> *Lower social class can't find anyone they can trust, so they don't vote. My friends never get a chance.*

Once elected, these officers did not stand up on behalf of the student body to protest unpopular decisions made by school or district administrators; instead they busied themselves with innocuous matters such as choosing the color scheme for the prom or the amusement park for senior class night.

> *Student Council doesn't have any voice. I think they should be able to vote on what kind of clothes we wear and whether we can go off campus. All they do is decide when we are going to have prom or dances. They hardly bring up any issues about what they want to change.*

> *I really don't know why they have it. They do the ring ceremony and the president makes a speech. They have no power at all. They say they can change things but they have done nothing.*

> *...really don't know when they have their meetings. They have to elect officers and get candidates. I haven't heard much about it. They are supposed to listen to complaints but what good comes of it, I don't know. They have an answer for everything. They do dances for juniors and seniors. Important things they don't do.*

Because they perceived student government to be an organization without any power or consequence, most general curriculum

students regarded running for office as a school-sanctioned popularity contest for overachievers.

> *The popular group go for attention. Same people get in every year. It makes me sick. They aren't even nice.*

Another intriguing similarity between school and bipartisan politics was the fact that running for a school office incurred considerable expense. Only a few of the students interviewed knew someone who had run for office (none of the general curriculum students interviewed was a class officer); several commented on the cost of mounting a campaign. They realized that students whose parents could defray the cost of papering every available inch of wall space with hundred of posters and distributing pins and balloons to supporters had a better chance of winning an election that someone who did not have a large war chest to capture the crowd's eye.

This inequality in resources was recognized by one school in the high graduation rate district. Its response was to simplify the procedure for getting on the ballot (just tell the homeroom teacher, no need for signed petitions) and, for candidates in the final election, to subsidize the costs of campaigning. This intervention on the part of the school produced greater involvement in the electoral process by a wider spectrum of the student body, but it did not end the monopoly on government offices by college bound students.

The school newspaper and yearbook were likewise staffed almost exclusively by college bound seniors. Because these publications are routinely entered into state and national

competitions by their faculty advisors, there was a press to recruit and retain only top-notch writers and artists. The degree of professionalization now required for these media productions meant that ordinary students, who might not be familiar with the latest computer graphics or desktop publishing packages, were not likely to be invited to fill these high-visibility positions.

The low levels of involvement of general curriculum students in co-curricular activities indicated that, with the exception of one school in the high graduation district, administrators and teachers were overlooking the power of service to strengthen large numbers of students' sense of affiliation to school.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Student participation in extracurricular activities depended on a number of factors: the methods the school used to publicize the availability of clubs and teams; the recruiting zeal of the faculty advisor or coach; the tradition of peer group involvement in certain areas. Methods for publicizing available options ranged from a list students said they knew existed somewhere in the guidance office to special rush programs featuring booths set up during an extended lunch hour. Schools that did not stage an official club-shopping expo relied instead on the informal system of faculty sponsor recruitment or peer invitation. For students unaffiliated to veteran club participants or who by chance were not in the class of a faculty sponsor, the chances of being invited to join were slim.

There is ample evidence that students bond to their high school through their participation in extracurricular activities (Ekstrom et al, 1986). Service clubs and athletic teams, in particular, have long been known to serve as vehicles for students eager to excel in non-academic activities which are valued by the community at large. With this association in mind, one might assume that schools would try everything possible to facilitate participation of low achieving students. However, this emphatically was not the case. In the low graduation district, students reported that overcrowding had forced school officials to eliminate club meetings from the lunch schedule. Postponing club meetings to after school meant that those students who had no transportation home save the school bus could not exercise the option to try out for teams or attend club meetings. *"My cousin wanted to try out for the tennis team but his mother doesn't have a car so he couldn't."* The high graduation district did recognize the importance of scheduling extracurricular activities during school hours. Twice a month the last period of the day was set aside for club meetings.

Other obstacles faced students who might have otherwise found in school-sponsored peer collaboration the motivation to persist to graduation. One was the minimum GPA requirement. For varsity athletics, a 1.5 GPA was required for team eligibility; service clubs set their admission criterion at 2.0. Thus, historically underachieving students were effectively excluded from the very kinds of activities which engender a sense of affiliation. Instead these students were given the message that

their academic troubles prohibited them from participating in the civic life of the school and the larger community.

Another obstacle preventing many ordinary students from entering the social life of school was the cost of participating. Membership in highly visible, highly competitive, all school group activities such as athletics, band, and cheerleading required expenditures (which run to several hundred dollars a year) for uniforms and training camps. Such costs effectively discouraged students whose parent(s) lacked discretionary income. Once again, that same school in the high graduation district which had acted to level the playing field for student elections made a commitment to its economically disadvantaged students and subsidized the purchase of their instruments and uniforms. Funds for these subsidies came from companies and organizations in the community who understood (as a result of the principal's lobbying - see the section on Leadership for more about this dynamic individual) that these showcase teams were the basis for generating school and community pride. Because these teams were able to recruit from the whole spectrum of the student body, they enjoyed the enthusiastic support of every segment of the populace. There was a powerful incentive to stay in a school whose teams' triumphs and tragedies were followed avidly by nearly everyone in the community.

COMMUTING TO THE WORLD OF WORK

Current national estimates indicate that about 45% of high school students hold down part time jobs, with minorities working considerably more hours than whites (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Approximately one-third of the general curriculum students interviewed reported that they worked part-time. Of these, the majority had acquired jobs through the offices of the DCT (Diversified Cooperative Training) program on campus.

None of the comprehensive high schools visited qualified as a vocational educational center; all offered a variety of business and technical courses for students who intended to enter the work force full-time directly upon graduation. Students had nothing but praise for job readiness courses precisely because they articulated so well with the demands they were encountering in their search for employment. Becoming informed about such issues as the interview process, application forms, resume writing, and dress codes were cited as examples of the kind of useful knowledge students need. The irony in this successful articulation between DCT courses and off campus work placement was that it underlined the irrelevance of much of the conventional curriculum for students who had no plans for pursuing post-secondary education. How could knowledge of the causes and consequences of the Hundred Years' War compare with instructions on how to type a business letter or balance accounts receivable?

Students who had located steady work after school (which for those enrolled in DCT courses meant leaving campus as early as

10:30 a.m.) expressed uninterest or impatience toward traditional extracurricular activities, sports included, imputing that they were unserious pastimes for those who did not need to work. When asked about school pride, for example, this commuting student's response was typical:

> *They try to encourage it. They have pep rallies. It's pretty immature. It's good for sophomores. I don't stay for them; I haven't been to one this year.*

Once students secured a part time position off-campus, their interest toward campus life further attenuated. Their circle of regular social contacts increasingly consisted of customers and fellow workers at the businesses to which they commuted.

> *I work a lot and I don't have time to show school spirit. I think most people think showing spirit is going to the game. I work at Dunkin' Donuts 30 hours a week. From 4 to 10 pm on schooldays; on weekends noon to 6. I've been working there 15 months. I am sure it interferes with my school work but I need to work. I want my own money. It'd [schoolwork] probably be better if I didn't but I'd be bored without it.*

> *I feel a lot of stress at work. If I'm not fast enough, customers have to wait and I worry. There are a lot of regulars there so I have made a lot of friends.*

> *I used to be in band, from the 4th grade on. When I started working, it was just Saturdays and Sundays. I could still participate in after school band practice. Now it's more hours and I can't call all the time [to be excused from practice] so I dropped it.*

Once an independent source of income became available, adolescents could begin to emulate an adult lifestyle of juggling salary and debts. Particularly in the low graduation district where at one high school, according to its principal, over 80% of

the student body held part time after school jobs, the availability of employment meant that many students, besides those in DCT, could pursue the acquisition of consumer goods. The attractiveness of receiving financial compensation for working had the effect of further diluting students' affiliation to school: they had less time to devote to their education, both academic (homework) and social (clubs and teams). The transactions occurring at the work site tended to diminish students' involvement in both the formal and informal curriculum of the school.

In spite of the obstacles and distractions, none of the general curriculum students interviewed were about to give up. This survey of their opinions and comments indicated that these students so valued the high school diploma that they were willing to cope with numerous stresses and strains. Among these were demands on their intelligence that were either very low or very high; discouragement of their efforts to comprehend; few positions of importance in school-wide activities, co-curricular as well as extracurricular; and fatigue and diminished involvement as a result of working nights and weekends, to name just a few. Some of these conditions were demoralizing, but those who were selected to be interviewed had made the decision, at least the day they talked to the researchers, to persevere.

To what extent did the implementation of the curriculum push other students to turn off the route toward graduation? This chapter has not answered that question, but these voices have supplied clues to where to look.

CHAPTER 3

SUPPORT SERVICES

For many general curriculum students the route toward graduation was arduous and filled with potential detours. As explained in Chapter 2, "Implementing the High School Curriculum", students did not make a distinction between the academic aspects of school and the social context in which these aspects were imbedded. The same was true for support services. Some programs were designed to facilitate students meeting the academic requirements for graduation, while other services provided them with support for personal needs. Schools that interweaved these two types of services were more successful in enabling their students to graduate. Hence, the dichotomous structure of this chapter is merely an organizational tool. The reader is asked to keep in mind that students' social needs often required as much attention as their academic training.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

ORIENTATION TO HIGH SCHOOL

The transition from junior high/middle school to senior high was often fraught with difficulties. Students were faced with the tasks of learning a new campus layout as well as a whole new set of rules and expectations. Aware of the need to make this transition as smooth as possible for their students, all of the schools studied provided some type of orientation program. The makeup, as well as the effectiveness, of these programs varied.

Considering the time and energy that school officials expended to insure that incoming students became familiar with their new schools, it was surprising to find that students in

general remembered little about the orientation they had received. This was true of 10th as well as 12th grade students. It was difficult to determine if this lack of impact was due to the superficiality of the orientation program or to the high degree of anxiety that incoming freshmen (or sophomores in some cases) experienced at the start of their new school experience. According to students, orientation programs consisted mainly of providing information about scheduling, the physical layout of the building, and school rules. Few students remembered any mention of graduation requirements or student services. As one student reflected,

> *They told you about the school but not the things you need to know -- I didn't know about the 1.5 thing [gpa] so I failed 9th grade. If I had known I would have tried harder.*

A tour of the campus was remembered most frequently, and occurred in all districts. Several students pointed to this aspect of orientation as being particularly helpful. Considering the complex physical layouts of large modern high schools, it was not surprising that services such as student guides and school maps helped to alleviate the fears of incoming students.

Several schools provided orientation programs for students who arrived in the middle of a school year. Frequently a peer counselor was assigned to these students, and again time was spent to insure that students knew their way to their classes. Guides were not provided by all schools; in those that did, students said having a personal contact was beneficial to their adjustment to the new environment.

Obviously scheduling was a task that had to be accomplished before the first day of classes, and orientation provided a convenient means for accomplishing this task. Schools approached scheduling differently. In most schools scheduling took place in group meetings. Student were given information about classes, often in the form of booklets, and then provided with guidelines for completing their schedules. Few schools provided a mechanism for giving one-on-one guidance to new students as they completed their schedules. Considering the importance of deciding on not only a course of study, but laying the foundation of credits for later graduation, one-on-one guidance would have allowed for more informed decision making at the start of the student's high school career.

GUIDANCE

While all schools had established guidance programs, some functioned more to schedule students and to complete paperwork than to work actively with students to insure their success. While almost all students indicated that they had a guidance counselor, a majority indicated that they received minimal assistance from them.

Schools differed in how they assigned counselors. Some schools assigned counselors by grade level. While this method allowed them to specialize in the type of support needed by students in each grade, it made development of continuous interpersonal relationships difficult. However students, in a school where they were assigned the same counselor every year, also expressed frustrations. If a student was assigned to a

counselor who was weak in an area, i.e., obtaining financial aid for college, that weakness influenced the quantity and quality of information the student received. One suggestion, made by a group of students frustrated by this problem, was to assign the same counselor for all four years, but also have a senior counselor who specialized in college programs and entrance requirements, financial aide, and other topics of interest to graduating seniors.

In general, students' access to information through the guidance department appeared to be sporadic and idiosyncratic. Even in a school in the high-graduation-rate district, students well into the second semester of their senior year were unable to determine if they had enough credits to graduate. One student who had enough credits to graduate was still frustrated. She explained,

> *Guidance is overworked, you can't find things out. I've been waiting almost a month to find out if I'm in a senior home room. If I'm not in a senior home room, I can't participate in graduation activities [e. g. walk in line, go to the prom].*

GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

While many students were unsure about the requirements for graduation, schools varied in how they monitored the progress students made in meeting them. Two of the districts (high and middle graduation rate) employed a group monitoring strategy. In these schools students were frequently given information about graduation requirements in group settings (e.g. a home room). As students approached their senior year, records were reviewed and

those students in danger of not meeting requirements were identified. These students were then provided with guidance services explaining alternative programs available to them.

Several drawbacks to this strategy were noted. First it allowed some students to fall far behind their classmates. Most of the students interviewed depended on parents' advice and sought out additional counseling only when needed. Since students who were at risk of dropping out were less likely to have parents who were familiar with district policies and state requirements, they were less likely to obtain information necessary to negotiate the task of amassing credits. Furthermore, students at risk of dropping out tended to have higher rates of absenteeism, making it more likely that these students would miss important guidance information provided in class settings.

Secondly, guidance systems which employed a group monitoring strategy appeared to be bogged down with paperwork. In a large school in the high graduation rate district, counselors were hand calculating seniors' GPA's well into the spring semester. Guidance counselors complained of too much paperwork which prevented them from addressing students' individual needs.

> *A month and a half on each end of the school year is spent on the mechanical aspects of changing schedules [3 months out of the school year is devoted to this]. As a consequence, we can't see a kid who comes in with a real problem because we have to get the schedule changes made. And I think this is where we lose a lot of kids. They fall between the cracks. There is no one here to see them when they need someone.*

> *The teacher student ratio is getting higher, and there is less and less clerical assistance. Then guidance ends up doing things like clerical work. This is frustrating when you're trying to see kids.*

The most graphic illustration of a student "slipping through the cracks" was a 17 year-old male who had earned only 4 credits - much to the surprise of the guidance office.

Other schools employed a small group/individualized approach in assisting students in meeting graduation requirements. For instance, in several schools faculty members were assigned as advisors to small groups of student advisees. The size of these groups, as well as the frequency of their meetings, permitted advisors to give individualized assistance whenever the need arose. Where advisee groups were multigraded, older students assisted in providing information to younger ones. In addition to regularly scheduled advisor/advisee meetings, a yearly spring conference between the advisor, advisee and guidance counselor provided personalized assistance in scheduling courses for the upcoming year and checking on progress toward graduation. Attempts were made to include parents in these conferences.

PERSONAL SUPPORT

Personal support refers to the ways in which schools meet the nonacademic needs of students. As mentioned earlier, students did not separate social and personal from academic needs. Students who were either closely bonded to the school or extremely alienated from it were frequently the ones who were addressed by personal support systems. This left average

students to fend for themselves. Schools' personal support programs were reactive rather than preventive in nature.

RECOGNITION SYSTEMS

Recognition of achievement has been found to positively influence motivation and to encourage students' efforts to accomplish academic and personal goals (Holland & Andre, 1987; LeCompte, 1987; Phelan, 1987). When a school consistently recognizes students for specific, positive behaviors, it may be said to have a formal recognition system. All schools had programs for formally recognizing student accomplishments, though the degree to which they were developed and implemented varied from school to school.

The most prominent form of student recognition was for athletic accomplishment. At all schools extensive trophy cases were found in either the entry way or the library -- two of the most public locations in a school. These cases were filled with awards for athletic achievement dating back many years. Less prominently displayed were large collections of framed photographs of students who had gained distinction in areas such as academic achievement, citizenship, community involvement, and effort. In some schools, these photographs were displayed at eye level in the office or cafeteria; in others they were located high on the walls in obscure locations.

Some schools recognized students' birthdays, others gave certificates for special effort, good citizenship, or good attendance during a grading period. One school reported sending out nearly 200 congratulations notes from the principal during a

grading period. Schools gave certificates for free food to students who achieved specific goals. Within the classroom, teachers held pizza parties to celebrate accomplishments. In the high graduation rate district, community service and business organizations were lobbied for their financial support of these awards.

> *Every time you get an award your name goes into a pot, and we give out door prizes - one large one (bike, etc). Merchants donate for door prizes. The more we can give away the more impression this makes on kids. If you don't get any awards, you don't have a chance to get to get the door prize. We also give away $5 bills. We have $1200 - $1500 in cash donated to these awards each year by local businesses.*

Overall, a great deal of time, money and effort was invested in the formal recognition system.

The presence of a formal award system, however, did not guarantee that it would contribute to students' sense of affiliation or school pride. Except for a school in the high graduation district, students spoke infrequently about the ways in which their school's formally recognized student accomplishments. Many did not know, for example, the reason pictures of specific students were hanging in the office or cafeteria. Why didn't the formal recognition system always contribute to students' sense of affiliation with school? In most schools it touched the lives of only a small minority of students. For instance, in one school only athletes and high academic achievers were recognized; and achievers only minimally. Other forms of student accomplishment were ignored. In still

other schools achievement in areas such as music and speech competitions were provided only minimal visibility.

An additional negative response to a school's efforts to recognize its students was encountered. A senior class president, in a school with a well-developed student recognition system, spoke about bartering among teachers to give recognition to specific students:

> *They [teachers] have nominees for all the categories. And if a teacher doesn't know someone, they will say [to one another], 'vote for him and I'll vote for your student.' I know a teacher who had a student get elected to all the positions over a few months. How did a student get athlete of the month when he was sitting [sic] on the bench [with a broken leg]?*

What matters is not whether this student was correct, but the extent to which students believed that this was the way the process worked.

PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Peer support groups were another way for schools to meet the social-emotional needs of students. Students with similar needs were assigned classes together. Group experiences were used to build group cohesiveness and provide students with interpersonal skills. As previously mentioned in this chapter, peer support groups were targeted to students with strong social skills or those classified as being "at-risk". Peer counseling classes for well adjusted students were designed to enable them to act as facilitators to their peers.

> *...it's [peer counseling] an elective. You interview. If selected you spend time bonding, then go out to be a facilitator. You can talk to people but not give advice -- a shoulder to lean on.*

Other peer counseling programs served as a vehicle to meet the needs of at-risk students.

> *We identify students according to state requirements: 3 or 4 more Fs, missed more than 15 days of school. We work on self-esteem, study skills, acceptance of their life as it is. This class is identified as peer counseling for the schedule so students don't have to say they are in the dropout prevention program.*

MENTORING PROGRAMS

Mentoring programs matched students with an adult (usually a teacher) facilitator.

> *Approximately 50 volunteer teachers are matched one on one with an at risk student and serve in a "friend" capacity as that student's advocate.*

Facilitators met with their students and spent time getting to know them. The goal of these programs was to develop a sense of family. Mentoring programs have been found to help adolescents overcome emotional, academic and social obstacles to staying in school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Phelan, 1987). In one school the facilitator, usually a female, was referred to as a "mom." The mentoring programs, in the schools studied, provided a vehicle for social engagement as well as role models within the school structure.

> *In general these students, at the end of the year, tell me that their [facilitating] teacher is the only adult they have a conversation with during the week.*

One innovative program reversed this traditional teacher-giver/student-receiver approach and assigned students to teachers as "secret pals." While this program was designed to increase students' social engagement by allowing them to make a personal

investment in school staff, it primarily used members of the student council -- those who already displayed a high level of personal investment in their schools. Thus, general curriculum students who didn't display any overt signs of disengagement were not provided with teacher-mentors nor were they likely to be involved in programs where they became "secret pals" to someone else -- two programs designed specifically to build adult/student relationships and engagement with school.

In enabling students to complete the route to graduation, all schools employed caring individuals committed to meeting the academic and personal needs of students. Frequently, however, this support was not built into the institutions' organizational structure. Consequently, students' ability to obtain support was haphazard, and many students in need of academic and/or social support were overlooked. This was particularly true of those students in the general curriculum. Additionally, those faculty providing support were often overwhelmed by the task before them and appeared to receive minimal institutional support for their efforts.

CHAPTER 4

SCHOOL POLICIES AND THEIR ENFORCEMENT

> *...it is crucial to view the dropout problem as growing out of conflict with and estrangement from institutional norms and rules that are represented in various discipline problems (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 381).*

Attendance policies -- covering behavior ranging from being tardy, cutting a class in the middle of the day, leaving the school grounds, and being truant -- occupy significant portions of educators' attention. Their enforcement is seen by educators as essential to providing an orderly environment in which learning can take place. Two major concerns underlie the concern given attendance issues: first, students in hallways disrupt ongoing classes and secondly, students not in class are denying themselves an education as well; excessive school absences are a leading predictor of dropping out (Gerics & Westheimer, 1988; Pallas, Natriello & McDill, 1989).

Given their importance, it was surprising to discover how little research had been completed on attendance policies. Studies on this topic have focused almost exclusively on the correlation between frequency of truant behavior and dropping out of school (cf. Ekstron, Goertz, Pollock, & Rock, 1986; Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman & Kaplan, 1987; Rumburger, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). No studies of the attendance behavior of general curriculum or college bound students could be located. Yet, these policies impact directly on every student in a school, not just those at-risk, and the ways in which they are implemented and enforced have the potential to directly affect

all students' engagement with learning. Therefore, this study sought to determine the types of attendance policies in effect and, more importantly, how they were experienced by general curriculum students. This study found that discussion of specific school polices cannot be separated from consideration of how they are implemented and enforced. A similar sounding policy at two different schools may in fact be very disparate when put into practice. Thus, while there were some policy differences across schools and districts, the major differences were in the ways in which they functioned within each school. Consequently, a simple catalogue of tardy and absentee policies would be of limited utility. In detailing how the implementation of tardy and absentee policies inadvertently "push" some students out of school, this chapter considers them from the perspective of the students - those most directly affected by them.

For students to be held accountable for adherence to a set of rules, they must first know what they are. This chapter begins with a review of how schools oriented students to their codes of conduct. Some of the tardy policies and enforcement strategies implemented in schools are then described. This description is followed by a more detailed account of reasons students gave for being late to classes or for cutting them. Since school responses to infractions varied and contributed to students' sense of school satisfaction or alienation, they will be considered in detail.

ORIENTATION TO THE RULES OF THE SCHOOL

Each of the six schools in the sample had a printed student code of conduct. And all made an effort to insure that students received copies of it and were aware of its specifics. Generally, the conduct code was first presented during orientation sessions for new students. Acknowledgement of having read and understood the rules was insured by the parents (or guardians) and the student having to sign a form to this effect and returning it to the school where it was placed on file. In all schools the conduct code was supposed to be reviewed in classes during the first day or two of the academic year.

Given the efforts districts expended on insuring that students knew the school's rules and the consequences for breaking them, it was somewhat discouraging to find that in only one district, the one with a high graduation rate, did students unequivocally state that they knew the rules and consequences for breaking them. In one school in particular within the district, students were very positive in their knowledge. At this school the principal talked about how important it was for all students to know the rules. During the first three days of the new academic year English classes included review of the conduct code as part of their scheduled lessons; then students were given a written test on it. The students at this school believed the rules were important and everyone should know them - the school's message had obviously been clearly communicated. It is important to note that this was the only school where all students were positive that every student who broke a rule, regardless of who

they were, would receive the same punishment. From the students' perspective, issues of equity in treatment and punishment were very salient and frequently commented on. In fact, differential treatment in numerous areas of school life were bitterly commented on by most students.

Students in the other schools acknowledged that neither they nor their parents had read the conduct code booklet. The seriousness with which mastering this handbook was taken in many schools was summarized in the comment of a male student who said, "At orientation they gave me a student handbook, but most people don't read it but just sign for it." When questioned about specific regulations, many students were unable to provide either a description of their school's rules or the consequences for infractions of them; yet they attended schools where the code was supposedly reviewed in class at the beginning of the term. It was difficult to determine whether teachers hadn't devote much time to this review or whether students had decided knowledge of rules was not important.

TARDIES AND CUTTING: THE SCHOOLS' POSITION

From a school's perspective policies surrounding being late to classes or having an unexcused absence are so tightly intertwined that it is not practical to talk about them separately. For instance, many schools equate a certain number of tardies as equal to an unexcused absence. This section will, therefore, consider these policies jointly.

SCHOOL POLICIES

The district that appeared to be most successful in reducing student tardies and absences had done so by using positive reinforcement instead of punishment. They had inaugurated a policy excusing from mid-semester exams those students with a "C" or higher grade average and fewer than a specified number of absences - the number of absences permitted varying by course grade. Under this policy, two unexcused tardies were converted into an unexcused absence. Since academically marginal students are especially frightened of tests covering large amounts of material, this policy had the double effect of convincing them to come to class and keep their grades up. This was the first year this policy had been in effect, but one of the district's principals said that already average daily attendance had improved noticeably.

Other districts used a punitive approach to student tardies and absences. Under these arrangements, students' grades were reduced either a letter grade or a specified percentage for unexcused absences; a certain number of tardies translated into an unexcused absence. Unfortunately, these policies were not working to get students to class on time, but rather were forcing

some of them to drop out. One female senior discussed this process:

> *Taking 2.2% off somebody's grade doesn't help a childwant to come to school. If you work hard and you havelots of points off, then you don't want to come to class because you are failing or getting really low grades even though you are working hard.*

A school administrator concurred:

> *Our county has a very strict attendance policy. Part of our problem with dropout rates and related issues is that the attendance policy eats these kids alive. If they skip a period, that is a letter grade reduction in that class. So it doesn't take much of this and they have straight F's. So after the first report card, they drop out.*

The policy of reducing students' grades by a letter for every unexcused absence was having a major impact on high achieving students as well as those defined as at-risk. This problem arose because teachers were not always sure what constituted an unexcused absence, students weren't marked in attendance when they were, or the office hadn't notified teachers that students were excused. An honors student at this school stated,

> *The attendance policy encourages kids to drop out. They want to lower the truancy rate but then tell you if you miss a day your grade will go down. Sometimes teachers don't report attendance accurately and you can have your grade lowered even if you were in class.*

To protect students there was an appeal process; one school had 400 appeals of first semester grades. A guidance counselor at this school stated that she had been cutting the grades off student transcripts to colleges until the appeals were settled

because some of the school's brightest students looked like they were flunking all their subjects.

ENFORCEMENT OF POLICIES

Once a school has an explicit, printed policy, enforcement becomes an issue. One principal felt that too many kids were out of class after the bell had rung. So he had set up a new monitoring system and impressed upon teachers that they were not to let students into their rooms if they were late. These students were to report to the cafeteria where teachers on duty wrote out admittance slips and recorded their names - a careful count was being kept of how many times individual students were late to specific classes. While this system had reduced the number of students in the halls between classes, in its wake it created some problems of its own. Students complained that they missed up to half a class because they had to walk all the way to the cafeteria, wait in line for their turn to get an admittance slip, and then walk back to their classroom. This particular school was spread over a five acre campus and students complained about the distance between certain rooms.

As the consequences of this policy had become clear, students reported that a number of their teachers had stopped sending them for admittance slips unless they were habitually late. One student reported that the teacher had told her that she couldn't learn anything if she was down in the cafeteria in line and that it was more disruptive to have students drifting in at various times once instruction had begun. The principal at this school, however, reported that he had noticed a significant

decrease in the number of students in the halls after the last bell had rung.

Other schools reported taking a counseling approach to those who were frequently tardy or had an unexcused absence. An assistant principal in charge of discipline stated:

> *If it's a first offense we counsel with the child. We are here to help and are on their side. Sometimes this works. Each time a child comes on a first offense we counsel and try to find out something about their background and why they are behaving as they are.*

This school also offered an incentive for students to be class on time.

> *We place a chart of all students who are clear of tardies for every grading period and use this as an incentive. If a student's name is on the list, they get a free hamburger pass from Burger King.*

The enforcement burden placed on teachers at some schools seemed excessive. Teachers reported having a minimum of an hour per evening of paperwork associated with tracking excused and unexcused absences and tardies. As a result, students in some schools reported that some of their teachers didn't count them as tardy unless they were frequently late.

> *Some teachers have big classes and they don't call the roll all the time. They say 'it looks like everyone is here.'*

VARIABILITY IN TEACHER RULES

The issue of variability in rules and enforcement was pervasive among students and deserves separate consideration. One school district had developed a generic student conduct code covering grades K-12. Each school used it as a basis for

developing their own rules and consequences. At one of the high schools in this district, responsibility for developing rules was turned over to the teachers, who each developed their own set of rules and consequences, reproduced them and handed them out to students at the beginning of the year. This had a couple of consequences for students, most of whom were taking seven different courses. First, students received seven different sets of teacher-constructed rules which they were then responsible for remembering. Adding to the complexity of seven sets of rules, students also had to master a teacher's interpretation of the rules - a feat which sometimes took longer than initially learning the rules themselves. For instance, one student said that he had a teacher who didn't count you as tardy if you were in the room and headed for your seat when the bell rang while another sent you to the office if you weren't in your seat with a pencil in hand when the bell rang. These interpretations were learned through trial and error; if a teacher wrote a referral on a student, the others in the class learned through observation the parameters for acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Rarely did students recall teachers explaining to a class the guidelines they used in rule enforcement. Nevertheless, this lack of explanation did not disturb students as much as did inconsistent enforcement. Students reported examples of teachers overlooking some behaviors one day and the next sending students to the office for the same offense. In these situations students learned that the rules stated weren't necessarily the rules

enforced.

> *I can understand when a teacher has to set down rules and keep to them. But some teachers change their minds overnight and are inconsistent.*

TARDIES AND CUTTING: THE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Teachers and administrators were clear -- they wanted students to be in class and on time. So a considerable portion of the student interviews were devoted to exploring issues surrounding tardies and cutting classes. Of interest were questions such as why might students be late to a class and what would happen to them when they were. Additionally, students were asked whether others at their school frequently cut classes and if so, why. Finally, students were asked if they were to cut a class, which one would it be and why. Interview probes were designed to determine how likely it was that a student who cut a class would be caught and what punishments would be meted out to them.

WHY STUDENTS ARE TARDY TO CLASSES

Since a school's tardy policies impact directly on students, it was no surprise that they had a lot to say about them. When asked why students might be late to class many pointed to the physical difficulty of getting from one class to another in the alloted time, feeling a need to socialize with friends, waiting in line to use the restroom, and teacher apathy.

Crowded Hallways and Physical Distance.

Students in schools located in rapidly growing areas commented first on the physical difficulty in getting from one class

to another within the four or five minutes scheduled. This difficulty took two different forms. First, in response to overcrowding schools have added portable classrooms. Movement from these outlying buildings to classes within the main building may take longer than the time originally built into the schedule for changing classes.

> *For me to get from the portables, upstairs to my locker and then to class can make me late. Inside the school you can do it, but then you don't have time to talk to friends. Five minutes just doesn't seem like enough time.*

> *I have one class out at the end of the portables and then the next at the front of the school and I can just barely make it, but if I have to go to my locker or there is a fight in the hall, I can't make it on time.*

The original physical plant in other schools spread classrooms over a wide area.

> *...your classes can be really far apart and you can't make it from one to the other in the amount of time between classes. You can't carry all of your books, but if you go to the locker you might be late. Just one little thing off routine, like a fight, and you'll be late.*

Students felt they were being unfairly penalized when distance between classes resulted in referrals for being tardy. In compensation, several students reported instances of teachers who were aware of the distance they had to cover between classes and so gave them an extra minute to get to the room. *I'm tardy in one class everyday because I'm coming from such a distance. I'm 30 seconds late, but class isn't ready so she doesn't count me*

tardy - *she knows how far I come*. Students, however, were not always fortunate to teachers who would make exceptions.

Crowded schools contributed in a second way to student tardiness. The crush of a large number of students trying to move through hallways frequently made swift passage impossible. One guidance counselor reported that she had taken a student's schedule and timed herself walking quickly to see if she could get between two classes in the allotted time. She said she had just made it - but went on to add she had really rushed, had done this at the end of the school day when there was no one in the halls to slow her progress, and hadn't allowed time to stop at a locker or restroom or say "hi" to any friends. She wondered how the kids managed this pace on a regular basis. And the researchers' experiences in the schools supported these contentions. In some schools the halls were indeed nearly impassible between classes.

Student Social Needs.

Students expressed a real need to connect with peers during the school day. And yet most found little time in their schedules to socialize with friends, especially when lunch shifts had been assigned by 5th period classroom location rather than grade level. Consequently, without meaning to be late to class, students reported they would begin talking to a friend in the hallway and then find they they were late to their next class. This press for social engagement was not surprising given the strong evidence that adolsencents view school as a site for emotional as well as intellectual stimulation (Fine, 1986).

Insufficient transit time thus emerged as one cause of student tardiness. In an attempt to ameliorate some of the consequences associated with a tight schedule one school in the sample had inserted an additional 10 minute break between two mid-morning class periods. Added to the regular five minutes provided for changing classes, students and facultly ended up with 15 minutes to make phone calls and go to the restroom. For students, this also provided an opportunity to socialize with friends, decreasing students' social reasons for being late to a class. Students and teachers both reported that this break period had significantly reduced the stress associated with the tight schedule of a crowded high school. A transfer student from a Canadian high school remarked, "In Canada we had 10 minutes to change classes and this really made a difference in whether you were on time or not".

Teacher Indifference.

Tardiness also had educational explanations; students felt that in some courses it didn't make any difference whether or not they were in class - either the teacher didn't care about whether they were present or not or so little instruction was going on that they weren't missing anything. Research (Pokay, Jernigan, & Michael, 1990) indicates that students are selective in the classes to which they are late or cut. These choices have to do with their relationships with teachers, evaluations of the quality of instruction, and the importance of being in class to learn new material. For instance, in response to a question on

what class you would cut if you could cut one, a female student said, with a lot of feeling:

> *I would cut physical science. I would run away. That's my jail cell class. I would gladly get up and leave it. Its not the subject, it's the teacher. I'm not learning anything and its just doing the work and cramming for the test.*

Issues of course content are discussed in Chapter 2, "Implementation of the High School Curriculum". It needs to be emphasized here, however, that issues of instructional strategies and content cannot be separated from policies dealing with tardiness and cutting classes.

WHY STUDENTS CUT CLASSES

A male high school senior, when asked to describe why he thought students cut class, said:

> *They cut, even though they have guards. They have cars and leave. And even if they don't leave the school, they are wandering around and in the bathrooms and everywhere. They cut because they don't believe they are going to get anywhere in education.*

Interviewed students stated that they themselves rarely cut classes, but added they knew others that did. They went on to provide detailed descriptions of the types of classes students usually cut, where they went, and how likely they were to be caught. In contrast to these typical comments, students in a school in the high graduation district appeared genuinely shocked at the very thought that anyone would cut a class because, as one student stated, "how can you learn anything if you aren't in class!"

Cutting classes took several forms. A student realizing that he or she was already tardy for a class might decide not to attend at all. Others consciously decided to cut a specific class and made plans to do so, but didn't leave the school grounds. Still other students arrived on time but by mid-day would decide they have had enough and would leave school. For instance, one student reported that occasionally he would realize that if he stayed at school any longer, he would get into trouble and so cut the remainder of the school day; in this situation he saw leaving school as a rational decision. Each of these choices - to either cut a specific class or the entire day - will be considered in turn.

Cutting Specific Classes.

Students were selective in the classes that they said they would cut; there were some they would never miss - particularly those where they felt they were learning a lot. The reasons students gave for cutting classes were similar to those they gave for being tardy: a rigid teacher, irrelevant course content, and desire to develop social relationships. Students would cut a particular teacher's class when they felt that the teacher didn't like students, didn't like teaching, or didn't care whether they attended.

> *On the first day of school a good teacher will pass out rules and what you need to be prepared for this class. Others say 'well, I didn't really want to come back today and I'm sure you guys didn't either.'*

The student who recounted the above quote added, "is that anyway to start a new school year?"

Students also cut, or selected as those they would like to cut, courses they called "boring". When students were asked to define "boring" they didn't talk about the subject matter but rather the way in which the content was delivered - the instructional strategies used by teachers. This topic has been treated in Chapter 2; in general, students didn't like classes where they were passive learners. Both Advanced Placement and General Curriculum students were unanimous in their dislike of those classes where students were expected to "read the chapter and answer the questions at the end". Students of all ability levels reported cutting, or wanting to cut, classes where they felt that nothing academically significant was happening - where they weren't learning anything. They called these classes a waste of their time.

Finally, students cut classes for social reasons -- they wanted to spend time with their friends. Most students' daily schedules were composed of seven different classes with a five minute break between them. Lunch was a 20 to 25 minute break in the routine; in most schools it provided just enough time to get through the line and eat quickly. As schools have become overcrowded and lunch periods have been split, students often may not see friends any time during the school day. Thus, classes scheduled during lunch shifts were among those students frequently would cut. Students at one school claimed there were those who stayed in the cafeteria for all three lunch periods rather than going to any 5th period classes.

Where Do Students Go Who Cut Class.

Students who chose to cut only one class period were not likely to leave the school building. Since hallways tended to be supervised by adults to guarantee no one was freely roaming the building, where did they go? The cafeteria, as already mentioned, was a frequent choice. But it served as a hideout for only a limited period of time during the school day. Restrooms were another favorite within-school hideout. Students had learned which ones were least likely to be supervised on a regular basis. It was reported that no one would notice if you "dropped in" to a large class, especially one with a lot of student movement, such as physical education. In these instances it wasn't that students wanted to leave the school but rather to escape from a particular class they disliked; they did so by finding alternative sites within the school.

Students also reported that the monitoring of movement through the hallways during classes was unevenly enforced. For instance, student leaders and high achievers admitted they were less likely than others to be asked to present hall passes. These students indicated that they frequently cut classes they found boring - and that this was easy for them to do. No one questioned where they were going because of their reputations as high achievers and school leaders.

Deciding To Leave School In The Middle Of The Day.

Strategies other than patroling the hallways are called for to insure that students don't leave the building during the day. One school's doors to the outside locked behind anyone leaving so

that to reenter you had to go around the building and come in through the main entrance. Consequently, only those who wanted to cut the remainder of the day used one of these doors. Schools spread over large areas assigned administrators, or hired security police, to patrol the grounds in golf carts. Students, however, knew the "safe" routes out of the building, how to avoid the patrols, and so generally could avoid being caught. Another approach for keeping students in schools was to lock the student parking lot so that students didn't have access to their cars during the day. But no school was completely escape-proof.

Most of the schools visited seem to have concentrated their energies on developing systems to keep students in classes or the building without paying attention to the reasons students might want to leave. Where this approach had been relied upon, students who wanted to cut had developed elaborate systems to enable them to safely do so. They saw it as a challenge to "beat the system". This gamemanship was strikingly missing from the district where the focus was on developing programs that would attract adolescents.

UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

Very little data were collected from students about unexcused absences, or truancy. A number of schools had established automated telephone calling systems to notify parents when their children were not in school. Students reported having learned the approximate time when these calls would be made to their homes and answering them, thus preventing their parents from learning about their absence. Personalized calls from the

school have more impact, but several students commented that their parents' reactions depended on their report of events. That is, parents made judgments about the legitimacy of the school's claims, sometimes siding with the school and others with the student. School administrators realized that personal calls were more effective, but stated that the size of their school precluded their making them except in rare circumstances.

Changing family structures have begun to impact on schools by creating a new group of students who are working against the odds to stay in school. These students, found most frequently in larger, more urbanized schools, no longer live with their parents or other adult guardians. They have been either kicked out by their parents or voluntarily left home because of chaotic conditions. In either case, they confront special problems when they are sick. Schools require written notice from parents or guardians to excuse an absence, but these students don't have anyone who can write one. In order not to penalize these students, schools have had to make exceptions to their normal policies in order to keep from pushing them out. One of the principals interviewed talked at length about this issue and the ways in which his/her school was dealing with it. To date, policies and procedures to handle these type of exceptions remain ad hoc.

Written excuses from parents, or lack of them, also present problems for other students. Most schools have a deadline within which written notice must be received for an absence to be excused. Unfortunately, a number of students come from homes

where parents are not always responsible. Where this policy is adhered to strictly, students who can least afford the penalities associated with an unexcused absence regularly accrue them. Reports of this having happened to them were collected from students in several different schools.

THE DRIVER'S LICENSE LAW

In an effort to encourage adolescents to remain in school, state legislation requires the suspension of a dropout's driver's license (s. 322.0601, F.S.). Principals complained about the amount of clerical work required to document class absences. And, they were unsure whether the law was effective in retaining students. Many went on to say that by the time the required documentation process had been completed, including parent conferences, the school year was almost over.

Students, on the other hand, were clear. They didn't believe that the law affected whether or not a student stayed in school.

> *Those who are going to drop out are going to drive even if they don't have a license. I know some who drive and don't have a license.*

A teacher, who also taught night school, complained about the negative impact this legislation had had on her classes. Students attending night school in order to keep their driver's licenses interfered with other student's learning. Other teachers echoed this sentiment - students who had returned to school merely to keep their driver's license were disruptive.

> *They are there to keep their driver's license. They don't want to learn. And those who want to learn can't [because they are so disruptive]. I'm a record keeper, documenting they are there. They are rude because they don't want to be there [in night school].*

PUNISHMENTS AND EQUITY

Even in the best of schools, some students will occasionally break a rule. When this happens a variety of things can occur. This study found that districts varied in their responses to students in these situations, with some schools taking a more therapeutic or counseling approach and others a punitive one. These responses appeared to be a consequence of the school's stance, or orientation, toward students. Thus, as with general attendance policies, a delineation alone of consequences for various infractions fails to convey the ways in which policies in some schools functioned to alienate students. While this section will provide information on some of the ways in which schools responded to infractions of their rules, it will primarily emphasize student perceptions of the context within which the rules were enforced.

The school that was most successful in reducing tardies and unexcused absences by using a positive rather than negative reinforcement also had the most comprehensive system of providing students with incentives for staying in school. The principal of this school, in describing what happened when a student with several referrals came to the office, stated:

> *If a student doesn't come to the office for 30 days they stay at the same level. They don't go to the next level in terms of consequences, but rather stay at the same level. This keeps kids from moving up referral levels and helps kids see that they have control over what happens to them.*

Contrast the above approach to that of a school with a very different posture toward infractions. At such a school, an honors student said,

> *There is no way here you can ever wipe the slate clean. No matter what you do, they always hold it over your head.*

A similar attitude was revealed in the following comment made by a student council member:

> *If you get a referal they don't listen to your side of the story. Teachers have lied and I've seen this when I've been in a class and then in the office. They say 'I don't want to hear it' when a student tries to tell their side of the incident. Every person has their own version and they have a right to say what happened.*

And in response to a question on what is the most important rule at this school, one student said,

> *'The teacher is always right.' Sometimes they make mistakes - but not according to the school.*

In contrast a student at a school with a more therapeutic approach to discipline talked about the assistant principal in the following terms:

> *It's been a better year with her here. People are more likely not to get into trouble. They know she's*

> *strict, but she's nice...She asks if we're making good grades and keeping them up. She doesn't favor people. Not like the assistant principal we had before.*

Students in most schools did not complain about school rules per se, but rather about the unfairness with which they believed they were enforced. Wehlage and Rutter (1986), using the High School and Beyond data, found that high school graduates did not differ from dropouts in their perceptions of teachers as uncaring or in their evaluation of the disciplinary system as unfair and ineffectual. This study also found that Honors, Advanced Placement, and General Curriculum students all held very similar views on the ways in which their schools enforced their student conduct code.

SATURDAY SCHOOL

Saturday School was a popular alternative to out-of-school suspension and many of the schools in this study used it. This program had the advantage of applying an educationally based punishment without excluding students from needed class time. The different ways in which schools implemented their Saturday School program, however, highlighted basic differences in their orientations toward their students. On one end of the continuum were those schools where the sole purpose of the program was to punish students - they were required to work cleaning up the school grounds for four hours straight. Schools at the other end of the continuum combined counseling with the work detail. Illustrative of this approach is the comment by an assistant principal in charge of discipline:

> *We do have Saturday School as an alternative to suspension. It combines manual labor on the campus with group sessions working on self esteem, study skills, and a wide variety of affective areas to support academic efforts.*

Students in the schools that maintained a theraputic approach to Saturday School voiced support of the program:

> *A lot of people get Saturday School. This keeps students in school and saves their grades. Kids who get in trouble and get suspended - it lowers their grades and then they just drop out, so suspension isn't really helping them.*

SUSPENSION AND DETENTION

Suspension from school was reserved for serious infractions or a history of repeated ones. Being suspended is highly correlated with dropping out (Pallas, 1984; Natriello, 1982, 1984) and thus is not used casually. Every school visited had suspension as an automatic penalty for fighting. Students believed, though, that the application of this penalty for fighting was not always fair. They complained:

> *I know someone who got into a fight and nothing happened to him and another person was horsing around, not exactly fighting, and he got suspended.*

> *They are strict on certain rules and not on others. When there is a fight they suspend both students. If a student hit me, I would hit him back. They should find out what happened.*

The gist of students' complaints revolved around the dual issues of who should be suspended and the equity with which the policy was applied. In response to the first complaint students, particularly those in larger, more urban schools, reported that they were physically threatened by other students. If these

threats should escalate to a physical attack, students said they would fight to defend themselves even if it meant they would be suspended. They don't see that they have any other choice. The inequity with which rules were applied to students was a pervasive theme in the interviews.

Only a few schools had In-School Suspension programs. This type of program ties up a teacher's time and is thus expensive to operate. After school detentions and Saturday School appeared to have replaceed ISS in most schools. Are they effective? Little information on ISS was supplied by school officials, but one student summarized her objections to it in the following way:

> *...the idea of them sitting in ISS doesn't help. That isn't the answer. You are sticking all the students who skip together in one large room and they are reinforcing each other...You have to give them a reason to get up in the morning and come to school.*

One of the schools, in the district where teachers developed their own set of rules, relied heavily on after school detentions. A student explaining her perception of this practice said:

> *Teachers have their own detentions they can give, like if a teacher doesn't like what you are doing in school they can give you 15 minutes or more after school.*

This was also the school where assistant principals, counselors, teachers and students all agreed that once a student was referred to the office it took anywhere from two to four weeks for them to be seen by an adult.

ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL: THE EFFECT OF POLICIES

Evidence has been presented throughout this chapter on the ways in which school policies and practices function to either engage students with learning or alienate them. Students interviewed supported the need for rules governing school conduct. In fact, they were most critical of teachers and administrators who did not maintain control. However, this desire for orderliness was counterbalanced by a recognition that some rules were overtly punitive and others were applied differentially to varying groups of students.

With few exceptions students reported that their schools' policies were predicated on the basis that students would misbehave if not closely monitored at all times. This sense of constantly being under suspicion led even high achieving students to challange the rules. Students' harshest criticisma were levied at those teachers and administrators whom they perceived to be "unfair". Reports of differential treatment permeated the student interviews and appeared to them to be pervasive - not localized in enforcement of infractions of school rules. But it is in the implementation of the student code of conduct where these differences were most notable.

These findings are consistent with other studies. For example, a large scale national study (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) found that while blacks and Hispanics were critical of their school's disciplinary system, it was the whites who were most unhappy with it. Further, 48% of the college-bound students in this study rated their school's discipline system as unfair.

These findings suggest that schools have a serious problem with their discipline systems and that these problems are affecting students' engagement with learning.

The students interviewed for this study were not, at least on the day interviewed, contemplating dropping out. While they complained about specific policies and the enforcement of others, they had developed coping strategies. Educators need to be concerned, however, with the impact that these policies may be having on students who have less well developed coping skills.

CHAPTER 5

SCHOOL CLIMATE

School climate is a concept that describes the physical, social, and learning environments students encounter at school (Anderson, 1982; Brookover, et al., 1982). Anderson (1982) classifies the dimensions of school climate into four categories: (1) ecology of a school (geographic, material, and physical aspects); (2) milieu (persons and groups); (3) culture (belief systems and values); and, (4) organizational structure (including span of control). Since climate has been shown to be an important variable in determining school effectiveness, achievement, and satisfaction (Davis & Thomas, 1989; Raviv, Raviv, & Reisel, 1990) it has an important effect on graduation rate. This chapter explores these four aspects of school climate (ecology, milieu, culture, and organizational structure) as they facilitate or hinder students' progress on the route to graduation.

ECOLOGY

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE SCHOOL

The first aspect of a school a student encounters is its appearance. For each of the high schools in this study, the physical plant both contributed to and reflected its climate. In some districts each school was architecturally unique, while in others schools were built according to a common design. Unique physical features, such as an atrium, served as a source of pride even in schools where students were somewhat demoralized (student morale will be discussed more fully in the section on

organizational structure). On the other hand, students spoke less positively about their school when it had no distinctive features.

> *We look like five other schools in this county, all built the same, nothing stands out.*

Obviously, the school's floor plan was not readily modifiable. However, some principals had made an attempt to individualize their schools. For example, one school employed an innovative xeriscaping program. While this school's floor plan was identical to others in the district, both teachers and students alike spoke positively about the display of plants outside their school. Use of paneling, display cases, or murals were other devices for personalizing schools.

Although maintenance was a problem faced by all administrators, schools where students felt demoralized were marked by graffiti and litter. A run down appearance was discouraging to faculty and students alike.

> *That smash on the wall, it's been like that for who knows how long. It's a little thing, but it's demoralizing. There's graffiti on the walls and the desks, food and wrappers left in desks, store rooms are dirty...take a picture of the rooms teachers work in. The school's 20-25 years old; it shouldn't be in the shape it's in.*

Graffiti did appear in a school with high morale, but the principal made it a point to remove unauthorized writing immediately. This principal explained "If you leave up one piece of graffiti it's an invitation for someone to add to it." If graffiti could not be washed off or painted over immediately, it

was taped over and expunged the next day. In addition, this principal used students in after-school detention to maintain the school's appearance. Students who were asked to invest energy in maintaining the school felt personally responsible for its appearance.

While principals used signs throughout their schools to communicate information they considered important, their messages varied. In schools where control was stressed, a person entering the campus would immediately notice large signs announcing restrictions such as **ANYONE CAUGHT DEFACING PROPERTY WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW, NO TRESPASSING**, or **ADMINISTRATOR'S PARKING ONLY.** In contrast, another school had worded similar messages more positively: for example, **FOR THE PROTECTION OF OUR STUDENTS WE ASK THAT ALL VISITORS PLEASE SIGN IN AT THE MAIN OFFICE.** Still other schools used signs to communicate a variety of positive messages. A large sign posted beside the driveway entering one school read, **ENTER TO LEARN.** Over the door of the school was a sign stating, **ALL STUDENTS CAN LEARN.** Beside the driveway exiting this school's campus was yet another sign: **LEAVE TO SERVE.** These signs were repeated throughout the school; and based on student comments, they had made a positive impression. In general, schools which communicated positive messages had higher levels of morale among both students and teachers.

Schools communicated messages to students in less overt ways. In some schools students had to pass by one or more police cars parked in front before entering the building. A number of

students said they objected to the presence of an armed officer on campus. The presence of such officers in schools was viewed as a form of surveillance by many students.

> *... you feel that everyone is watching you. If you think that people are watching you, you think maybe you will do something wrong. People in the office, in the halls, police. Everywhere people watching you.*

> *Having all these guards and all those people with walkie talkies doesn't make me feel comfortable. School should be a place for learning...here they are always waiting for a crime to strike. Its almost like they are saying, there will be fights and they are there waiting for fights to happen.*

OVERCROWDING IN SCHOOLS

In many areas of Florida high schools are overcrowded. This was true of most of the schools visited for this study. And this overcrowding affected the schools' climates in several ways. As described in Chapter 4, "Attendance Policies and Their Enforcement", crowded hallways contributed to student tardies, increasing tension between students and teachers and administrators. Beyond this, overcrowding seemed to have a ripple effect throughout a school.

In several schools teachers "floated" from one classroom to another. Principals had tried to minimize the negative impact of this arrangement.

> *Our teachers float a lot. Two English teachers share a room because they only teach four classes [a day]. If possible I like to give teachers a room of their own, but that's not always possible. When teachers have to float we try to keep rooms in the same area. We try to keep them within one or two classrooms of each other so they don't have to move very far. But this isn't always possible.*

Teachers expressed frustration over not having their own room and students complained that it was difficult to know where to find a teacher when they needed help since, during other class periods, teachers were in the different rooms.

Overcrowding also has led schools to devise complex lunch schedules. Multiple eating shifts have made it impossible for student clubs to meet in the middle of the day, forcing most schools to schedule these at the end of the academic day. The way in which this policy contributes to social disengagement was discussed in Chapter 2, "Implementation of the High School Curriculum". Where schools had scheduled lunch shifts by location of 5th period classes rather than grade level, students complained that they never saw their friends, again contributing to student disengagement. In one school students complained that they frequently didn't get to eat because lunch lines moved so slowly that they weren't even served before their lunch period was over. Other schools maintained an open campus during lunch because they couldn't feed all students in the cafeteria.

As discussed later in this chapter, overcrowding decreased students' ability to get timely assistance from the guidance department. This affected students' ability to get academic and personal counseling. Where this had happened, students expressed the belief that, "no one cares what happens to you."

The schools visited had tried to minimize the negative impact of overcrowding on their faculty and students. But there were limits to their options.

MILIEU

Milieu is the social aspect of climate which describes the ways individuals and groups interact in school. Since schools in Florida are faced with the task of serving an increasingly diverse student population, the multicultural nature of student bodies is the major focus of this section. What have schools done to meet the needs of their culturally diverse populations? School administratORS have been slow to acknowledge the needs of new cultural groups. One principal expressed surprise that black Haitian and Jamaican students did not identify with Afro-Americans. This distinction however, was not missed by a black Jamaican student,

> *The Jamaicans and American blacks are two different groups. It was obvious to me when I came but, I'm not sure teachers know -- but they should.*

Even the State of Florida's official categorizing system does not recognize distinctions among these cultural groups. As one director of guidance put it,

> *How do you categorize a black Puerto Rican? Mexican Americans don't want to be labeled Hispanic. The FIRN system doesn't match categories with the reality of incoming groups.*

Office personnel for the most part did not reflect the ethnic makeup of the schools they served. A large school which served a substantial Hispanic population had no one in the front office who spoke Spanish. According to a group of Hispanic students,

> *We have so many people who speak Spanish, and yet no one in the office can speak Spanish. When the parents call in they can't find out what is going on. They need to have someone who can handle the public.*

Although a new secretary had recently been hired, a bilingual teacher still had to be called from her classroom whenever a non-English speaking person came to the office for information.

Hispanic students described themselves as being excluded from their schools' mainstream activities. For example, a school with a soccer team had only one Hispanic soccer player. A group of Hispanic students explained this scarcity.

> *We hear that the coaches here know the white students for a long time and they always choose them. The coaches never choose the Hispanics. We try out. Everyone has the right to try out. But we don't get pick[ed]. We were born playing soccer, we are good in soccer and in baseball. There are students who are on the team, but they are no good. Their parents give money and they get on the team. A lot of students go to school for the sports. There have to be all the students on the teams, not a prejudiced team. There are no Hispanic cheerleaders either. I have not seen any.*

These students, as well as other Hispanic students interviewed, felt they were excluded from school activities. School administrators have not been effective in communicating an understanding and respect for students' cultural diversity.

Despite school officials' seeming lack of responsiveness to the multicultural nature of their student bodies, the students were highly aware of this diversity. In all schools studied, racial and ethnic groups had specific areas of the campus where they "hung out," and students rarely violated these boundaries.

A Canadian student who had recently transferred into the system explained,

> *The Jamaicans hang out at the very front where cars come in. At the side by the busses, the New Yorkers hang out. From lunch the white kids hang out in the middle hall mall by the office; I thought they owned the hall when I first came here.*

While schools obviously did not segregate, the various types of curricula, along with the non-interactive nature of most classroom instruction, had effectively kept students in ethnically/racially homogeneous groups. Consequently, students commented on their reluctance to interact across cultural lines,

> *Even on the Human Relations Council when we work in groups, blacks and whites are separate*

Although students were placed in culturally diverse classrooms, they rarely had opportunities to interact with and understand students from cultural groups other than their own. One student who was disturbed by the lack of cross-group interaction observed,

> *Instead of having all these separations of groups, we should mix. I think they should mix the classes. They are mixed some but not very much, and they need to do more. They should have some group assignments that have to be done together. This helps you get to know other students and also get to know their ideas.*

None of the teachers interviewed had attended, nor were they aware of, in-service programs dealing with racial and ethnic diversity in the work place. Consequently, students rarely reported instances of classroom instruction or discussion

designed to help them understand different racial and ethnic groups.

A disproportionate number of dropouts come from minority populations (Fine, 1986; Fine & Zane, 1989; McDermott, 1989; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985; Pallas et al, 1989; Phelan, 1987; Rumberger, 1981). One explanation of this phenomenon is conflict between majority and minority cultures. This conflict, as it impinges on learning and school behavior, has been attributed to a variety of things including low teacher and administrator expectations (Ogbu, 1987; Pittman, 1986) and cross-cultural variations in learning styles (Mau, 1987), communication processing styles (Erickson, 1987), and speech networks (Hymes, 1974). Regardless of its origin, cultural sensitivity on the part of schools contributes to students' engagement with learning. When a school is perceived as being insensitive or oblivious to the cultural differences among its student body, its holding power is diminished.

CULTURE

While the culture of a school encompasses many variables, the schools' values will be the focus of this section. These values were demonstrated by schools in two ways:

1) the values of the administration as demonstrated by the principal's mission statement;
2) the values of the students as evidenced by their discussions of school pride.

MISSION STATEMENTS

Research has demonstrated that effective schools have principals who have a clearly enunciated mission, and who communicate that mission to faculty as well as students (Davis & Thomas, 1989; Phelan, 1987; LeCompte, 1987). Principals in all three districts displayed an appreciation of the importance of formulating an explicit mission statement for their respective schools. However, the extent to which the mission statement was communicated to the school community varied. Ways in which principals conveyed their mission included displaying it on walls around the school campus or relegating it to a brief discussion at a faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year.

The principal who most effectively communicated the school's mission statement integrated it thoroughly into all aspects of the school's educational program, and "talk[ed] about it every time anyone will let you open [your] mouth." In this school, which was in the high graduation district, the mission statement was, "to do everything in our power to see to it that these kids graduate." This commitment guided policy such as modifying the curriculum. The principal talked about the connection between the school's mission and curriculum in the following terms:

> We have got to change our philosophy so that we can meet their needs. Our modified curriculum [a special program which allowed student to receive credit in two subjects for courses with a high degree of overlap] is an effort to meet these kids' needs."

The willingness to have flexible policies, such as eligibility criteria for entry into alternative programs, was undergirded by the mission statement of getting kids through to graduation.

> *Before, the qualification for people to go to night school was too hard for most students to qualify. We have rewritten this policy so now juniors can go...If a kid is ready to go to school, my feeling is let him go; don't make him wait until the junior [year].*

Here the school's mission was operationalized as greater accessibility to alternative school programs. In this school, students and faculty alike reiterated the principal's philosophy on numerous occasions throughout the interviews.

SCHOOL PRIDE

While administrators expressed their values in explicit statements, students expressed their valuing of school primarily in response to questions about school pride. If schools are to have holding power over students, then schools must matter to them. Fine (1985) noted that dropouts, although committed to education, were not committed to the schools they attended. Fernandez and Shu (1988) reported that negative feelings about school were a major factor in dropping out among Hispanic students. Hawkins, Doueck, and Lishner (1988) reported that practices which promoted bonding, positively affected attitudes towards school.

A close correspondence between the extent to which students at a school exhibited school pride and that school's graduation rate was observed. Schools with high graduation rates had students who displayed school pride, and conversely low school

pride was associated with a lower graduation rate. In a school with especially low school pride, students and the administration maintained an adversarial relationship. Students at this school repeatedly reported feelings of alienation. The nature of this adversarial relationship will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter.

One of the strongest mechanisms for instilling school pride was school rituals, such as wearing school colors on specified days and pep rallies. The school which was the most fervent in displaying its pride consistently held pep rallies before games and utilized a "spirit stick" (a trophy which went to the class that yelled the loudest during the rally) to promote this enthusiasm. Students enthusiastically attended these rallies as well as major and minor sporting events. Pep rallies at other schools were often held inconsistently and were poorly attended. A school with particularly low school pride had only had a total of three pep rallies by the middle of the spring semester, and it was doubtful any more would be scheduled. Pep rallies were held in the bleachers (the only facility large enough to accommodate the entire student body). Until recently the school dress code had not allowed shorts, and many students skipped the rallies because of hot weather. Students at this school often referred to the principal's lack of participation in such events when explaining their own apathy.

Competition, both academic and athletic, was a focal point of school pride at all schools. It was important, however, that this competition be well publicized. Students were quick to

point out marquees or prominently displayed bulletin boards used to announce the latest school accomplishment.

What was perceived to be important by the administration and staff was in turn esteemed by students. In short, adults modeled school pride for their students. An example of adults modeling school pride was an office staff who decorated their desks with pom-poms and school memorabilia. In one school faculty and staff "adopted" individual athletes. These school "parents" were in charge of their athletes to the extent of watching their diet so they would maintain their optimum playing weight. It should be noted that academic endeavors served equally well as a source of pride when accomplishments at academic competitions were well publicized.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Two different general orientations to issues surrounding control of student behavior were found among the schools studied. The first was a punitive orientation, in which tight control over student behavior was stressed. Students, in schools which held this orientation, perceived the administration's role as watchers who were always trying to catch someone breaking a rule. A sense of game playing prevailed in these schools; and frequently, the students won. For example, administrators periodically swept the bathrooms for smokers, but students employed an effective lookout system to thwart these efforts. School staff patrolled the student parking lot to catch students cutting class, so students simply left from the other side of campus.

In contrast, other schools had a facilitative orientation. These schools also sought to direct student behavior, but did so in ways that communicated expectations and responsibility. For example, when asked about cutting class a student in the high graduation rate district responded,

> *I would not want to cut...the more you go to class the sooner you get out*

The contrast between a punitive or facilitative orientation was illustrated in two schools' efforts at monitoring lunch room behavior. The facilitative school in the high graduation rate district controlled behavior by providing students with a private senior lunch room. Adults never entered this lunch room either to supervise or to clean up; students were expected to police themselves. A clock was placed on the wall so students could tell when they needed to be back in class, since there weren't any bells in this cafeteria. The principal explained that next year the seniors would either be working or in college and be responsible for getting where they needed to be on time; and she knew they could do it this year as well. When a senior was asked whether he was ever late to class after lunch, he responded

> *No, I'm never late. There's a clock in the senior cafeteria. I'm responsible for getting myself to class on time. After all, next year no one will follow me around and see that I get any place on time.*

Juxtapose the above practice to that of a school with a very punitive orientation in the low graduation rate district. In response to problems getting students to put their trash in the cafeteria barrels, the school had installed video cameras in the

eating area; students were employed to observe these tapes and to identify anyone not complying with school rules.

The facilitative school had the least amount of misbehavior of any of the schools observed. In this school students had a clear understanding of what was expected of them, and punishments were consistently applied to anyone caught breaking the rules. This school taught students that they had choices, and that their choices had clear consequences. However, students in a punitive school commented,

> *[we] don't know what the rules are, but know what we're not suppose to do. Consequences are clear, but not consistently applied.*

Students at this school reported feeling "alienated,"

> *[there's a] wall between students and administration... it's like a jail...it's us and them.*

Hence, schools' orientation toward student control, whether punitive or facilitative, directly affected the behavior as well as the morale of their student bodies.

It is clear that these four aspects of climate (ecology, milieu, culture, and organizational structure) affect a school's graduation rate. The role of the principal in creating and controlling each aspect of his/her school's climate was crucial. School climate has been described as the personality of a school (Anderson, 1982), and it was the leadership provided by the principal which gave definition to the school's personality. In general, schools in which principals displayed a lack of leadership were marked by unkempt campuses, hostility, and

demoralization among faculty and students alike. Principals who provided leadership in beautifying the physical plant, responding to cultural diversity, communicating their educational values, and exercising control in an authoritative manner created climates in which students were able to develop academic as well as social engagement.

CHAPTER 6
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Few studies have taken the tack of actually asking students about their perceptions of school policies and practices. This study differed from previous research by providing students with a platform through which they could voice their responses to various features of schools which affected their academic and social engagement. Since engagement with school increases the likelihood of persisting to graduation, student perceptions of school, **whether accurate or not**, need to be taken seriously by educators.

According to students, Florida high schools could increase their graduation rates with little or no expenditure of additional funds. What is required is for schools to seriously examine the ways in which their policies and practices affect students' academic and social engagement.

Findings from this research are summarized in the first section of this chapter. After presentation of Global findings, those from each of the chapters are listed in turn: Curriculum, Support Services, School Policies, and School Climate. The second section of the chapter, using the same format, presents recommendations.

Since data for this research were collected using open-ended interview guides, the findings reflect the perceptions of students, using their own words, rather than statistical summaries of questionnaire responses. The findings summarized below are those derived directly from the interviews with students, complemented by those with teachers, counselors, and administrators. Unless otherwise stated, student perceptions are

those of all students interviewed regardless of their achievement levels.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

GLOBAL

These findings reflect those issues and concerns which transcended the specific findings detailed under Curriculum, Support Services, School Policies, and School Climate.

1. Interviewed students gave equal emphasis to academic and social engagement as factors influencing their persistence to graduation. This study revealed that to students these two systems -- the academic and social -- were so tightly intertwined that it was impossible to separate their influence on graduation rates.

2. Schools varied in their orientation to students. The high graduation district had a facilitative orientation which sought to direct student behavior in positive ways that communicated high expectations and joint responsibility for learning. At the other end of the continuum were schools with a punitive orientation in which tight control over student behavior was stressed.

3. Overcrowding, evident in the high schools visited, had a ripple effect which impacted all areas of the schools' programs. Overcrowding contributed to tardies; increased the difficulty of students meeting with teachers outside of class time; contributed to student difficulties in being assigned to appropriate level courses; resulted in complex lunch schedules making it difficult, if not impossible, for student clubs to meet during school hours; and, decreased students' ability to get timely assistance from the guidance department and deans.

CURRICULUM

A formal curriculum was delivered in classrooms by teachers, while an informal curriculum was available from peers, coaches, activity sponsors and employers as a result of students' participation in extracurricular activities and commuting to the world of work. Mastering both curricula equipped students to engage successfully in academic and social situations.

1. Students interviewed did not carefully distinguish between the subject matter of their courses and the instructional strategy by which it was delivered. For

instance, students stated that they did not learn material when they believed teachers didn't like them, publicly embarrassed students in front of classmates, or appeared to dislike teaching.

2. The majority of students -- both general curriculum and college bound -- found their required courses boring. In particular they regarded solitary seatwork, especially end of chapter review exercises, as the dullest expenditure of class time. As a result, they regarded the assignment to read a chapter and answer the questions at its end as the least effective instructional strategy for mastering new material.

3. Among the instructional strategies which students indicated were the most effective in helping them learn new material were ample teacher explanation, student questioning, and group projects. In short, students felt that they learned material most effectively when they were active partners in the instruction process rather than passive recipients.

4. Students preferred teachers who used a variety of instructional strategies. Lecturing was tolerable if it was followed by class discussion during which students were guided to see how the new material was (a) a continuation or modification of what they had already studied, and (b) related to their present and future lives. Occasional assignments to small groups were welcomed because they provided an opportunity to become acquainted with classmates not part of a pre-existing social network.

5. Many students claimed that teachers often refused to explain either the relevance or the utility of the exercises they assigned. The most commonly offered description of a poor teacher was someone who declined to elaborate on the material set forth in the textbook.

6. According to numerous students, teachers excused their reluctance to spend time elaborating or justifying the curriculum on the grounds that the syllabus was already overcrowded. The drive to cover state mandated course objectives had two consequences: (a) it created the impression in students that it was impossible to ever master a topic; they could only get a glimpse of its intricate complexities, and (b) little could be done for those students who had trouble grasping the material on the first pass.

7. Students expressed a willingness to tackle longer, meatier assignments (e. g., term papers, panel discussions, science projects) provided they were accompanied by three conditions: (a) ample time was

given to deadline, (b) work was graded and returned promptly, and (c) comments were included so that there were clear indications of how the grade was arrived at and how the work could be improved.

8. The assignment of six to seven different subject matter areas per day taxed the capacity of most general students to digest and make sense of the material. This switching of mind sets was all the more fatiguing in light of the fact that there was no down time built in to the school day during which students could catch their breath and regroup, physically and mentally.

9. Schools that made extra effort to lower barriers to students' participation in extracurricular activities (e. g., scheduling club meetings during school hours, subsidizing costs of uniforms and instruments, enlisting financial support from community businesses) generated a strong sense of affiliation and pride among their students. Schools in the high graduation rate district fostered in their students a sense of pride in being a member of an institution that was important to the community.

SUPPORT SERVICES

All schools were equipped with programs to provide students with academic and personal support. Academic support included orientation programs for students new to the school, guidance departments, and strategies for monitoring students' progress in meeting graduation requirements. Personal support took the form of programs which gave recognition to student achievement, peer support groups, and mentoring programs which fostered strong student-adult relationships.

1. Although information regarding requirements for graduation were generally presented at orientation programs for new students, freshmen and sophomores, when questioned, were often unaware of them. Students may be overwhelmed by the amount of information presented in these initial orientation meetings, and thus only attend to information relating to the more immediate demands of adapting to a new school (e.g. where are my classrooms, when do I eat lunch, etc.). At this juncture in their academic careers, students may not perceive this information as important.

2. Many students were unaware of, or did they make use of, in-place support services (after school tutoring, homework hotlines, peer counseling, alternative programs). In some schools even teachers were unaware of the range of services available to students or the logistics of accessing them.

3. Based on descriptions by students, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators, student services in most schools were organized to serve the college bound, behavioral problems, and those enrolled in dropout prevention programs. This approach left general curriculum students to fend for themselves in dealing with both academic and social pressures. While almost all students indicated that they had a guidance counselor, a majority indicated that the assistance they received from him\her was so minimal that they used a counselor only as a last resort in solving problems.

4. Students and teachers as well as guidance counselors agreed that guidance departments were overloaded with paperwork (first and last month and a half taken up with scheduling, preparing college applications and alternative program placements); they could do little in the way of therapeutic intervention or prevention. In one school students reported having to wait up to three weeks to see a guidance counselor or dean.

5. Schools in the high graduation district prominently publicized students' individual achievements within the school (bulletin boards and photographs) and to the community (newspaper stories and bumper stickers). In contrast, in the low graduation district fewer awards were available to students, the criteria on which they were based was unclear, and high achieving students believed that teachers and administrators used them to reward their favorite students rather than those who earned them.

SCHOOL POLICIES AND THEIR ENFORCEMENT

Attendance policies -- covering behavior ranging from being tardy, cutting a class in the middle of the day, leaving the school grounds, and being truant -- occupy significant portions of educator's attention. In spite of their importance, there is almost no research on the development and enforcement of these type of policies. Yet, they directly affect all students' engagement with learning. Findings summarized below indicate that schools varied, in systematic ways, in the types of attendance policies they implemented and their consequences.

1. Consistent with other research (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986), this study found that Honors, Advanced Placement, and General Curriculum students all held very similar views on the ways in which their schools enforced the student conduct code. While students were critical of teachers and administrators who did not maintain control, their desire for orderliness was counterbalanced by a recognition that some rules, while just, were differentially applied to varying groups of students.

2. Students in the high graduation district (regardless of achievement level) reported that consequences of rule infractions were the same for everyone regardless of academic standing or athletic ability. Conversely, students in the low graduation district reported numerous instances of punishments varying by student status.

3. Rarely did students recall teachers explaining to a class the specific guidelines they used in rule enforcement. This lack of explanation, however, did not disturb students as much as did inconsistent enforcement. Students reported examples of teachers overlooking some behavior one day and the next sending students to the office for the same offense. In these situations students learned that the rules stated were not necessarily the rules enforced.

4. Based on interviews with students, teachers, counselors, and administrators, most of the schools visited had concentrated their energies on developing systems to keep students in classes or the building without paying attention to the reasons students might want to leave.

5. Students were able to supply three major reasons for being tardy to classes: (a) the hallways were so crowded that timely movement was impossible and/or classes were so far apart that students couldn't get from one to another in the allotted time; (b) opportunities for students to interact socially with peers were limited to the time between classes; and (3) the belief that some teachers were indifferent to whether or not they were in class. The reasons students gave for cutting classes were similar to those given for being tardy: (a) teacher indifference, (b) irrelevant course content, and (c) a desire to develop social relationships.

6. With few exceptions, most notably those in the high graduation district, students reported that their schools' policies were predicated on the basis that students would misbehave if not closely monitored at all times. This sense of constantly being under suspicion led even high achieving students to state that they frequently challenged school rules.

7. Using positive incentives (e.g., exempting students from end of semester exams for low number of tardies and absences) was more effective in getting students to attend class and be on time than punishment (e.g., deducting points from final grades for unexcused absences). The school in the high graduation district that most effectively used positive reinforcement rather

than punishment, also had the most comprehensive system of providing students with incentives for staying in school.

8. Using positive incentives (e.g., allowing students to move one level down in the severity of sanctions they faced if they received no new referrals in a 30 day period) was effective in getting students to modify their behavior. Schools with higher than average graduation rates utilized forgiveness policies so that episodes of misbehavior or noncompliance could be expunged.

9. Data were skimpy on the effectiveness of the Driver's License Law (s. 322.0601, F.S.); principals and guidance counselors complained about the paperwork involved in documenting attendance under the law. Most students felt that those who dropped out would drive even without a license. Teachers said that students who returned to school merely to keep their driver's license were disruptive.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

School climate is a concept that describes the physical, social, and learning environments students encounter at school (Anderson, 1982; Brookover, et al., 1982). Since climate has been shown to be an important variable in determining school effectiveness, achievement, and satisfaction (Davis & Thomas, 1989; Raviv, Raviv, & Reisel, 1990) it has an important effect on graduation rate.

1. In schools with higher than average graduation rates, principals communicated their mission statement publicly and repeatedly to students and staff as well as to the community at large. These mission statements guided the modification of course offerings and the implementation of policies designed to facilitate the accumulation of credits necessary for graduation. Moreover, students as well as faculty knew what the mission statement was and how it influenced school programs.

2. Schools with a clean appearance and displays of positively worded signs had higher levels of student and staff morale than did those that were dirty, marked by graffiti, or had negatively worded signs posted around the campus and in the building. Examples of negatively worded signs were, "No Students Admitted" and "Anyone Caught Defacing Property Will Be Prosecuted To The Full Extent Of The Law". Positively worded messages included, "For The Protection Of Our Students We Ask That All Visitors Please Sign In At The Main Office" and "All Students Can Learn."

3. None of the teachers interviewed had attended, nor were they aware of, inservice programs dealing with racial and ethnic diversity in the work place. Consequently, students rarely reported instances of classroom instruction or discussion designed to help them understand different racial and ethnic groups.

4. In all schools visited, administrators and teachers seemed unaware of, or unconcerned with, significant cultural differences between ethnic subgroups (e.g., African Americans and Caribbean blacks; Hispanic surnamed students from Central and South America). Since cultural sensitivity on the part of schools contributes to students' engagement with learning, a school perceived as being insensitive or oblivious to the cultural differences among its student body has diminished holding power.

5. Schools have been slow to respond to the increasing diversity of their student body. Frequently the only bilingual adults on campus were foreign language teachers. This resulted in students and parents of limited English proficiency having difficulty getting help from monolingual front office staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CURRICULUM

1. In order to arouse students' interest and attention, high school teachers should receive inservice training on how to use a variety of instructional strategies, e.g., cooperative learning, inquiry approaches, and critical thinking.

2. In addition, staff workshops on teaching in multicultural settings could increase the likelihood that classroom instructional activities would contribute to interracial and interethnic cooperation and respect.

3. To reduce the intellectual fatigue associated with a six to seven course load per day and to foster deeper engagement with the material, alternatives to the 50 minute period should be explored; for example, assigning half the number of courses for double the number of periods.

4. Schools should reduce barriers to students' participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Efforts should be undertaken to include a greater diversity of students in high visibility, all-school positions (e.g. student government, varsity athletics, cheerleading, and marching band).

5. Club and team activities should be scheduled several times a month during school hours in order to give students who do not have personal transportation the opportunity to explore and join.

6. Efforts to increase the number and range of students participating in co- and extracurricular activities will involve subsidizing the costs of running for student government, purchase of athletic uniforms and band instruments, and scholarships to summer cheerleading and music camps. Arranging for these subsidies will require that principals actively solicit the financial support of the business community (in the form of donations of equipment and prizes).

SUPPORT SERVICES

1. In order to increase the effectiveness of orientation programs, schools should categorize the information provided in these programs into several specialized presentations over the course of the students' first semester at school. These presentations could take the form of an orientation class in which students were tested over requirements and available support programs, and/or they could take the form of periodic orientation assemblies in which testimonials from seniors would highlight the importance and usefulness of the information.

2. In order to strengthen student-counselor relationships, the same guidance counselor should be assigned to a student throughout his/her high school career. A counselor specializing in college programs and entrance requirements, financial aid, job placement, and other topics of interest to graduating seniors could supplement the assistance provided by the grade-level counselor.

3. Students in grades 9-12 should be provided with one-on-one assistance from a guidance counselor when determining class schedules so that monitoring of progress toward meeting graduation requirements could be optimized.

4. Reassigning routine aspects of scheduling to clerical staff would free up counselors to listen to and talk with students who have started to lose interest in school.

5. The schools' formal recognition system should be broadened and the inclusion criteria made explicit so that all students would know what an award meant and on what basis it was conferred.

6. The school's formal recognition system should involve the surrounding community. Press releases and solicited support from civic organizations and private industry could enhance the recognition programs already in place in all schools.

SCHOOL POLICIES AND THEIR ENFORCEMENT

1. School districts could increase student engagement and compliance with school rules if they would base student conduct policies on positive reinforcement of desired behavior rather than punitive approaches.

2. Schools should implement an authoritative, as opposed to an authoritarian, model of control. This model consists of: (a) communication of high expectations; (b) consistent and reasonable enforcement of rules; and, (c) emphasis on shared responsibility between school and student for successful completion of graduation requirements.

3. Consequences for infractions of school rules should be the same for all students regardless of academic or athletic ability.

4. Teachers should explain to their classes the guidelines they use in enforcement of classroom rules. Teachers then should be consistent in their enforcement of these rules.

5. Faculty should cooperatively examine their own and their school's tardy policies to explore reasons for students' noncompliance (e.g., overcrowded facilities, need for socializing, boredom) and come up with incentives for promptness.

6. Schools should reexamine the way students currently get assigned to lunch shifts to determine if it interferes with opportunities for peer interaction. Options for lunch shift assignments include homogeneous grade level (e.g., 1st lunch shift for sophomores); space (e.g., separate room or quadrant of lunchroom for different lunch shifts); or off-campus privileges for seniors.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

1. Principals and their faculty should review their current mission statement to determine if it guides policy and practice. Once a statement is agreed upon, it should be communicated regularly to students, staff and the local community.

2. In order to be sensitive to the needs of a culturally diverse population, schools should recruit administrative, instructional, and clerical staff to reflect the ethnic makeup of their student body.

3. Inservice training in cultural diversity for administrators and faculty could increase awareness and sensitivity to students from different cultural backgrounds.

4. It is important that schools provide students with solidarity-building rituals as well as modeling the pride they seek to engender in their students. Ways to increase students' affiliation with their school include: (a) holding pep rallies consistently, with participation by faculty and administration; (b) publicizing the school's athletic and academic achievements to the community; (c) expanding the range of students recognized for their accomplishments in academics and community service; and (d) mobilizing students' participation in the upkeep and beautification of the school plant.

5. Signs around campus should be worded positively.

6. Districts should explore ways of alleviating overcrowded conditions (e.g., staggered schedules, year round schooling, night classes).

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APPENDIX A

Table 1

Description of Student Population
by Race/Ethnicity and Sex

	n (178)	Percent of Total Population
FEMALES	94	52.8
BF	28	15.7
WF	52	29.2
HF	12	6.7
AF	2	1.1
MALES	84	47.2
BM	20	11.2
WM	50	28.1
HM	12	6.7
AM	2	1.1
WHITES	102	57.3
BLACKS	48	27.0
HISPANICS	24	13.5
ASIANS	4	2.2

APPENDIX B

CODING CATEGORIES

The Route to Graduation

STAR Grant 89-041

ABSence

ASPirations

AT-Risk

CLImate

COMmunity relations

CULture

CUTting classes/school

DRIver License Law

EXTtracurricular Activities

GRAduation

GUIdance

HOMework

IN-Service

LEAdership (school)

MISsion (of school/education)

ORIentation

PARents

PICtures (phrases)

PRIde (school)

PROmotion (school/class)

PUNishments (detentions,etc.)

RECognition (formal student)

RELationships

RULes (school)

SENsitivity (needs/feelings)

Instructional STRategies

STUdy hall and habits

SUBject area

TARdy (policies/practices)

TENsions (within school)

WORk